

RED RIVER



JEAN-CLAUDE CASTEX

Lulu

To Alexie, from her grandfather

Red River



Translated from French by artificial intelligence

Jean-Claude Castex

Lulu

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Cover: Daguerreotype of the Bernier de Ladurantaye family, taken at the Simon Duffin Studio, Main Street, Winnipeg in the year of our Lord 1899. From left to right: Rémi, Alexie, Lucas, Élisabeth, and Marie-Louise.

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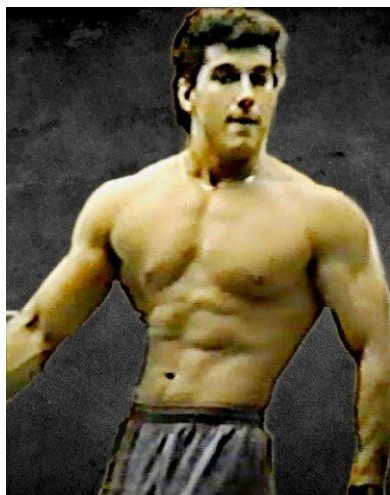
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Alexie de La Durantaye on her arrival in Pembina



Rémi

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

Rivière-aux-Rats

(July 1843)

—Alexie! You're not doing anything useful ! Stop playing with your dog! If he could talk, he'd tell you you're very annoying ! You're always after him !

—I'm not just playing, Mother. I'm trying to train him to be a good dog ! Malou is strong and powerful. If he's not raised properly, he could be dangerous !

My dog Malou came from Tadoussac, where I lived for three months in 1842 with my family.

—Would you like a puppy ? a Native American trapper named Ferdinand Gagnon asked, holding out three malamute pups crossed with wolves — one grey, one black and one white.

—I don't have any money, I replied, and neither do my parents!

Seeing me gently stroke the grey pup with affection, the trapper smiled and said :

—Take him. I'm giving him to you as a gift. The factor at the Hudson's Bay Company post refused to buy them¹.

—Thank you, Ferdinand. I'm overjoyed!

The puppy was adorable, like all young creatures. Nature endows the babies of every species with extra beauty and fragility—

¹ ●The "factor" of the local Hudson's Bay Company trading post.

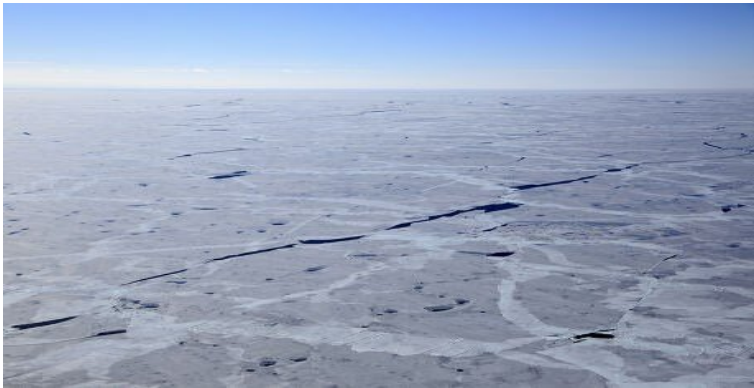
Red River

perhaps to make them more lovable, easier to care for. They're so vulnerable. I named him Malou, in memory of his parents: a malamute mother and a wolf (loup) father. From that day on, I trained him daily.

—*You've been playing with him for over an hour already ! my mother protested. That's enough. I need your help. Go fetch the sack of ashes so we can make soap... Training dogs is a man's job! You have no business meddling in things that don't concern you !*

—*You're still the same old Mother, I replied. With ideas like that, women will always stay everyone's servants.*

—*You're getting far too cheeky, Alexie, speaking to me like that, she snapped. We are no one's servants. We work for those we love. Do you think men's work is easier ? Digging the soil to make farmland, felling trees, hauling logs, uprooting stumps—none of it is easy ! I don't know what we're going to do with you. You argue about everything ! Go join the men and help clear the land. Then you'll see how 'easy' it really is !*



Icepack in the Saint-Laurent Gulf [Priv. Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 2

Trois-Pistoles, my birthplace.

I was born on May 13, 1832, in Trois-Pistoles, an ancient seigneury nestled along the southern shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Despite what my name might suggest —Alexie de La Durantaye— I am not of noble blood. Abbé Gaucher, our parish priest, made that clear one day without the slightest prompting from me.

—Don't think yourself better than others, he said curtly. Your ancestors were no nobles. Your real name ought to be "dit" La Durantaye. Just a family nickname.

I was not yet ten when, one bitter January day in 1842, my father burst through the door in a rage.

—Fools ! The Gaudreaults and their lot want to build another church at the far end of the village. We're already breaking our backs just to survive — and now they want to build another church ? As if paying rent to the seigneur, Sieur Riou, weren't burden enough. The world is full of idiots !

Our parish of Trois-Pistoles stretched along a single “row”, kilometers in length, and arguments over *where* to build the church had become a blood sport. We Canadians are hot-blooded, after all. Social harmony began to fray. Parishioners fought, sometimes literally, and in the end, each faction built its own chapel. But church-building wasn't the only cause for discord. Petty rivalries abounded.

I once overheard my father muttering:

Red River

—*You know that at Sunday mass, Sieur Riou² and his family always sit on the lord's bench — the first row on the right, directly before the choir. Our militia captain sits across, first row left. Usually, the priest incenses the lord before the captain, and the beadle hands him the blessed bread first as well.*

—*Yes, and ?* my mother replied.

—*Well, last Sunday, Abbé Gaucher got distracted. He gave communion to the captain before the lord. Can you imagine the scandal ?*

—*Gaucher's head is too close to Heaven. His feet barely touch the ground !* said my mother.

—*If vanity could fly, my elder sister quipped, shaking her head, there'd be no room left in the sky for bustards and teals.*

—*We're not saints either,* my mother added, turning to my father. *You always stroll into church at the third bell — the one that calls the late-comers, who'd rather smoke a pipe or sip one last drink.*

—*It's just to keep warm,* my older brother said with a grin.

—*Anyway, I've heard a rumor,* I said. *The Archbishop of Québec is fed up with all our chapel bickering. He's threatening excommunication for anyone who defies God's will.*

—*His will, you mean,* one of my brothers muttered darkly, emphasizing the “his.”

—*Stop criticizing the Church without thinking,* said Mum.

² Sieur Riou : the owner of the seigneurie of Trois-Pistoles.

Red River

—*There are too many quarrelers, added my brother Pacôme. What's Monsignor going to do, excommunicate half the parish ?*

We all feared excommunication. It wasn't just a spiritual punishment — it was a public humiliation. A warning to the rest of the unruly flock. The priest would mount the pulpit and shout :

—*Nicéphore Gamache has surrendered himself to the power of the Devil !*

And with that, he would snuff out a candle —its flame symbolizing Nicéphore's soul— and cast it to the ground from on high, as if flinging him straight into Hell. I still remember the dull thud of the snuffer striking the stone floor. It sounded like a soul landing hard in damnation. The priest's voice would echo like something out of the Inquisition:

—*From this day forward, Nicéphore Gamache is forbidden from entering this church. He shall receive no sacrament, nor shall he be buried in consecrated ground. No one may speak to him —not here, not in any parish— save for his immediate kin. Any who disobey shall share in his excommunication. This is a mortal sin !*

—*Mark my words, my father warned us that evening. Don't say a word to poor Nicéphore. I won't have our family put under quarantine.*

—*As if that weren't already enough, my mother added with exasperation, now the Government wants to raise school taxes. They claim it's to build schools for every child in the country. But from what I hear, the poor settlers of the Province are on the brink of rebellion.*

Poverty, it must be said, is easier to endure when the wealthy have the decency to be discreet. Religion, too, can help soften the blow — especially when it reminds us that the rich, for all their privileges, are destined for the fires of Hell. And then there were the priest's bans: *no meat on Fridays or Saturdays.*

Red River

—*Well, my uncle Josaphat remarked dryly one day, it's not like we can afford meat seven days a week anyway.*

—*So really, I chimed in, we're blessed. It's the rich who are being punished.*

—*Don't worry about the rich, said one of my brothers with a shrug. They've got fine fish to take the place of meat.*

But these petty quarrels —parochial or otherwise— were becoming unbearable. The weight of these ceaseless, sanctimonious debates strained even the warmest of relationships. My parents, weary of the noise, the gossip, the suffocating conformity, made a decision that would alter the course of our lives.

—*We're leaving ! my father declared one evening, as we scraped the last crumbs from our modest plates. I've had enough of these idiotic arguments. We're moving to Tadoussac.*

And so it was. We crossed the river in search of simpler days, drawn by that eternal illusion — the sky always bluer, the grass always greener, just beyond the horizon.



Old plan of Trois-Pistoles (Priv. Coll.)

Red River

Chapter 3

Heading on the St. Lawrence ice pack.

“We’re off! Farewell, Trois-Pistoles!”

It was January 1842 when we quit our little village, having bid a reluctant farewell to our landlord, Monsieur Riou, who looked none too pleased to lose a “censitaire”. Our departure had the air of a great migration. Eight sledges groaned beneath heaps of pine trunks, atop which were stacked clothes, cooking pots, mismatched chairs, and the long “*beggars’ bench*” that had once served as a bed for wandering vagrants braving the muddy roads of Lower Canada.

—Never refuse shelter and a bowl of soup to someone poorer than yourself, Mother often said.

I’ve never broken that rule.

The journey to Tadoussac was no simple affair — over sixty kilometers of frozen desolation across the jagged surface of the Gulf, locked in winter’s icy grip. *Pompon*, our valiant horse, hauled three sledges on his own; *Gaby*, our ageing ox, managed two more despite his tired bones. The remaining “trains” were left to our cows, including young *Victoria*, whose milk was so rich it could be churned into a butter my father proudly called “*our butters*”. “Victoria”, was the name my curmudgeonly dad gave our dairy cow as a small rebellion of language against the austerity of our lives.

—Take a good look, Father said, his voice thick with emotion. *Trois-Pistoles is disappearing...*

Red River

And indeed it was. The village faded into the ashen silhouette of the *Monts Notre-Dame*, which themselves blurred into the endless sky of a leaden winter morning.

—*Tabarnouche ! It's rocking like mad !* shouted one of my brothers, smacking at the blocks of ice with his stick in some futile attempt to steady them.

Despite the light snow that dusted the surface and softened our descent, the ice was treacherous. We stumbled and fell often on the chaotic *bouscueil* — those jagged, unstable heaps born of wind, tide, and current. I remember riding astride the luggage with the youngest of my eleven siblings, while the older ones trudged alongside our parents, their feet wrapped in worn boots or strapped into snowshoes.

—*We'll sleep here tonight*, Father finally declared. *We're just about half-way across the Gulf.*

That night, no one truly slept. Ominous creaks and groans echoed beneath us, as though rats were gnawing beneath a taut sheet. The ice whispered, shifted, and sometimes screamed — each sound a reminder that we were guests on a brittle skin stretched over a churning, invisible abyss.

At dawn, with only a faint silver glow to guide us, Mother and Father gave the signal to leave.

—*We must go now*, Father said grimly. *The thaw of the past few days worries me. If the ice breaks, we'll be stranded, cut off from the North Shore. And let's be honest — none of us slept. If we press on now, we'll reach Tadoussac by nightfall.*

But he hadn't even finished his sentence when a deep, growling rumble erupted beneath us. A violent crack splintered the silence. Ice shattered around us; frigid, brackish water sprayed high into the air. Fear struck with such force that we didn't feel the cold.

Red River

A shrill cry rose above the chaos — my little sister, pointing with trembling fingers.

—*There ! Look! Mon Dieu! We're lost !*

The floe beneath us split and groaned, revealing swirling, ink-black water foaming like something possessed. One of the cows slipped and plunged into the crevasse, bellowing as she disappeared. Driven mad by terror, Pompon and the rest of the herd stampeded blindly into the abyss. Within seconds, our entire livestock was swallowed by the river's liquid mouth, leaving behind only the screams of children and the helpless cries of our parents.

—*Stop shouting ! Stay close and pray to Sainte-Anne de Beaupré !* Mother called, her voice straining against despair. *Don't move. Don't run. There will be no danger if we stay calm... That's it, children... stay here...*

And that's when we realized it — the slab of ice we stood upon had broken free, set adrift like an island on the St. Lawrence. The tortured neighs of our horse, the despairing moans of our drowned cattle still echoed from the dark waters.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, silence returned. With a brutal finality, the ice closed in. A slab struck the wreckage like a guillotine, crushing the last of our animals. One moment they were there —living, breathing, pleading— and the next, they were gone.

—*Don't panic, my father said calmly. The ice will hold. We'll make it across. Alexie, Eugénie, Léontine —watch over the little ones. Adhémar, Pacôme, Adrien, the rest of you— join together and pull the sleds by hand."*

—*There ! Look ! The ice has sealed again to the north. Let's move, now !*

Red River

The adults sprang into action, seizing children, bundles, and the lightest sledges. They rushed across the fragile, hastily rejoined ice, which could give way again at any moment.

—*All fourteen of us made it,*” my mother whispered, breathless.

—*Yes... but we’ve lost all our animals,* my father added, tears brimming in his eyes.



Red River

Chapter 4 **Tadoussac**

Night had nearly descended when the scattered rooftops of Tadoussac came into view. For the final stretch, the ice was smooth — flat as a snowy table. The village, cradled at the mouth of the Saguenay River in the curve of a deep bay, huddled like a hermit crab in its shell.

Only one building, the largest after the church, glowed faintly through its glazed windows : the *Hudson's Bay Company* trading post. The trappers' cabins and the settlers' homes, far humbler, had no glass — just sheets of oiled paper or translucent animal skins stretched across their frames. The faint flicker of oil lamps and candles could barely pierce that rudimentary veil. The cottages, dim and silent, slept like great sled dogs curled against the cold.

—*At last ! Tadoussac ! my mother cried. Thank God... Children, remember to thank St. Anne. Your prayers have protected us so far. Never forget to pray !*

—*But we still lost all the animals, Mother, Adhémar said bitterly. St. Anne wasn't so merciful after all !*

—*You always have to say something foolish, Adhémar, she snapped. Careful, she might make you pay for your mockery !*

—*A saint, he muttered with a smirk, isn't as petty as a human being.*

—*Enough, Adhémar. That's enough ! No one's laughing !*

In exchange for a few copper sols, the Scottish manager of the Hudson's Bay post —who spoke a rough but serviceable French— let us

Red River

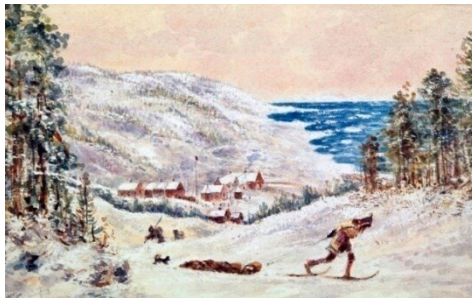
sleep in the general store that night. He told us, with some pride, that Tadoussac had served for centuries as a natural harbor where trappers and fishermen from the Saguenay and North Shore came to trade their pelts and catches, bound for Europe.

—*You know, he said, Tadoussac was the first French fur trading post in Canada — perhaps in all of North America.*

Only years later did I understand that the Hudson's Bay Company had long sought to discourage French Canadian settlement, seeking to preserve its economic monopoly in the region. Though it had formally pledged to promote Canadian colonization, the reality was quite different.

—*You see, my daughter, my father explained to me the following year, once we had resettled in Rivière-aux-Rats (soon to be called Chicoutimi), the Company paid Canadians more than it paid the Indians for furs. And that's precisely why they didn't want too many of us here — too many settlers meant too many profits lost.*

—*The future is in the woods !* said the Scotsman that evening, frowning. *Lumbering is becoming more important than the fur trade.*



Tadoussac, around 1850, watercolor. [Priv. Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 5 **Rat River** (La Rivière-aux-Rats)

Until spring arrived, we survived largely on hunting — and above all, on fishing. To do so, we cut holes through the thick, frozen crust of the St. Lawrence River, crouching for hours over the icy void with sharpened patience.

One day, in the woods near our encampment, we came across a group of trappers who brought news: following a petition from the settlers along the Charlevoix Coast, an expedition had departed from Québec City to colonize the Lac Saint-Jean region, at the far end of the Saguenay fjord.

—*Let's join them !* my mother declared with sudden resolve.

—*All we need to do is build canoes,* my father added, matter-of-factly.

And so, our spring was dedicated to the task. With the help of a Montagnais man from Tadoussac, we constructed five medium-sized canoes, sturdy and true.

As for me, I spent my spare hours training Malou. He was a quick student, eager and alert, soon responding with flawless precision to every command — “Sit ! Down ! Here ! Leave it ! Halt !”

He was, by all accounts, a remarkably obedient dog. Still, my father insisted on strict discipline. Malou's strength, he warned, and his wild lineage, made him a creature of power — one who could prove dangerous if not firmly and lovingly mastered.

Red River

—*Malamutes, he said, are like people — they need clear rules to flourish. Some Alaskan trappers turn them into fighters. Ours must be peaceful. He needs a strong leader, and that leader is you.*

—*I'll make you the best dog in the world, Malou,* I whispered to him one night.

Each day, my father and brothers hunted to feed our large family. Game was plentiful enough that we could barter surplus meat for vegetables, grain, potatoes, and wild rice — then still commonly called ‘*wild oats*.’

Between hunts, my father turned his attention to the canoes, crafting them from birchbark so we could join the settlers at Rivière-aux-Rats, near Lac Saint-Jean, where muskrat trapping promised a good living.

—*The beauty of trapping, he would often say, is that you eat the meat and sell the pelt.*”

In the evenings, the whole family pitched in. Our tools were humble : curved knives, hatchets, saws, awls, and planes. My father taught us how to harvest the spring bark of the white birch:

—*Look for dwarf birch, he explained. It gives large sheets of bark without blemish. It resists rot and frost. See how supple and thick it is — it's perfect.*

He was meticulous in his craft. He shaped the ribs of the canoes by bending wood over heat, then stitched the bark sheets together with fine white spruce roots, called *ouatapi*. To seal the seams, he mixed fir resin with bear fat, creating a caulking that prevented cracking. For our feet, he made soft moccasins, knowing that shoes would damage the fragile canoe hulls.

Red River

We considered ourselves lucky —blessed, even— to have such ingenious and devoted parents.

—*We're all so proud of you !* we often told them.

Our admiration always made Father chuckle. He was too modest to take praise seriously.

In May, our family set out on a great adventure along the Saguenay. We took advantage of the rising tide, which neutralized the fjord's powerful current, but rowing for days was grueling work. We had nearly a hundred kilometers to cover before reaching Rivière-aux-Rats, a fledgling settlement that was little more than a clearing in the wilderness.

When we arrived, nothing was organized. We were among the very first to lay roots in that remote land.

—*Now we must make our land,* Father declared.

—*What does that mean, Mother ?* I asked.

—*It means clearing the trees, using the timber to build our home or burning it to make soap ashes,* she replied. *And above all—grubbing. Digging out the stumps, root and all.*

That summer of 1842, most of the newcomers made do as best they could. We formed work crews —*corvées*— much like the old *cent-sitaires* of the Saint-Laurent seigneuries, to tackle the harshest tasks.

Most of the felled wood was burned into ash, later gathered by merchant schooners in early spring and late autumn to be processed into potash and soap.

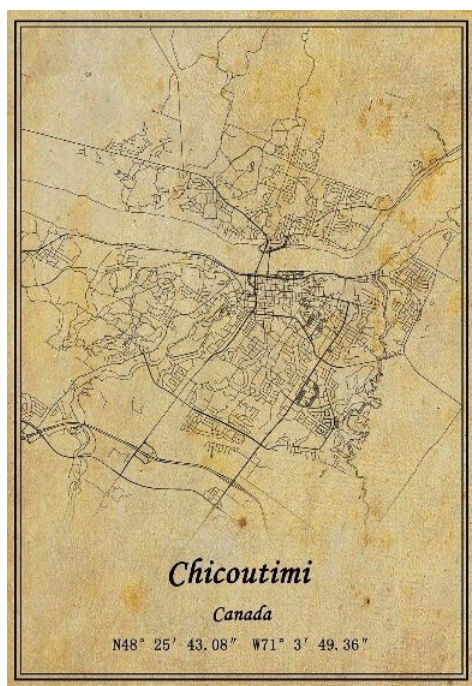
Though I was just a girl, I took part in the labor — rough, dangerous, and unrelenting. We built towering tripods from heavy beams

Red River

and fixed a chain winch to them to heave the massive stumps from the earth. The work blistered my hands and drained my strength, and I often longed for it to be over. But farm life offered no respite. It was this or... starvation.

By the summer of 1843, when the government surveyor arrived to divide the land into official agricultural lots, we were ready.

—*Well*, he exclaimed, casting a look at my father, *no one could ever accuse you of being lazy !*



Red River

Chapter 6

My life in Rivière-aux-Rats³

In both winter and summer, my father trapped fur-bearing animals, assisted by my older brothers. Their efforts provided the meat that Maman transformed into hearty, mouth-watering meals in her great copper cauldron. Wild fruits — especially the famed blueberries we quaintly called “*bleuets*” — were a festive delight, savored by the whole family on special occasions.

—*Tonight, we’re having a blueberry pie and pig’s feet stew⁴*” my mother would announce, her voice tinged with celebration.

There was much talk of tapping the vast resources of the forest near the Rivière-aux-Rats. In the warm months, we sowed wheat, corn, and potatoes. Maman ruled over the household with the capable help of my elder sisters.

—*Everyone must do their share, she often said. The lazy profit unfairly from the toil of others. Philomène, please run to the general store for some tinder — I need to start the fire!*

We procured what we couldn’t produce ourselves from the general store Johnny Guay had built at the mouth of the Rat River. He bartered the essentials of life — salt, flour, lamp oil— in exchange for our fine pelts. Every Tuesday evening, a schooner would dock in front of Johnny’s store, shuttling goods and news between Rivière-aux-Rats and Québec City, with a stop in La Malbaie.

Johnny occasionally lent money *at interest* to struggling settlers. I believe he was a Protestant — or at least claimed to be. Among us

³ • The toponym *Rivière-aux-Rats* was once common in New France, as muskrats were everywhere. A few places still exist in Québec and Manitoba. Elsewhere, they have become Muskrat River.

⁴ Un ragoût de pattes de cochon et une tarte au bleuets.

Red River

Catholics, lending at interest was strictly forbidden. The parish priest warned us that such behavior was immoral and would result in the denial of absolution. And to die without absolution was to risk eternal damnation. The very thought terrified us.

So, it seemed that only Protestants and Jews could grow wealthy without endangering their souls. Sometimes, I wondered whether this wasn't rather unjust. We were, in a sense, fated to remain poor — just to have a chance at Heaven.

—A man who grows rich in ten years is a thief! thundered our saintly parish priest one Sunday, brandishing Hell like a shotgun to keep us in line. *And don't forget — no rich man shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, any more than a camel may pass through the eye of a needle!*

After sermons like that, we found comfort in our poverty. The more miserable our earthly lives, the wider we imagined the Gates of Heaven would open to receive us. It was a kind of consolation — no, a compensation. A spiritual certainty that allowed us to view the rich as wretched souls destined to fuel the fires of eternal punishment.

Little by little, life in Rivière-aux-Rats began to take shape around us. Families settled in, routines formed, and even moments of joy broke the solemn rhythm of toil.

—Saturday night, Maman would proclaim with a smile, the Tremblays are coming to visit!

Every Saturday evening, visitors would arrive, and our home would come alive. We danced with abandon, sang like nightingales, and lost ourselves in stories that lifted us, if only briefly, from the weight of our laborious days.

We Canadians, with our naturally cheerful disposition, have always found joy amid hardship. And God knows we've endured our share — especially under the heel of another nation like Albion.

Red River

Those unforgettable nights were often brightened by itinerant storytellers who disembarked from passing schooners, hoping to collect a few *piastres* in our remote corners of the world.

Of course, we received fewer travelers than Trois-Pistoles, which lay on the main road to Acadia. There, the residents of the first line of houses by the shore had the privilege of hosting a weekly procession of peddlers, tireless raconteurs, tinkers, knife grinders, and tradesmen of every kind — not to mention tattered beggars and wandering gypsies whose rickety wagons were pulled by emaciated horses. We may have feared the gypsies a little, but we adored traveling performers, especially those who brought animals. They would ask the villagers to collect a small sum before revealing the talents of their dancing bears or clever dogs.

—For ten little chelings only, ladies and gentlemen, one of them would proclaim, you shall see Garonne, our magnificent bear from the French Pyrenees, weighin' near a thousand pounds, dancing for your delight !

Rivière-aux-Rats, by contrast, was far more isolated. From time to time, when the ice thawed, an itinerant notary would make the trek up the Saguenay to register land sales or last wills. In our second year there, a schoolmaster came to lodge in the village for a few months. He was fed and housed by the locals — that was his pay. But he taught only boys, as it was deemed morally improper for an unmarried young man to instruct girls. He was strikingly handsome, and every girl in the parish was in love with him.

—That Baptiste Gagnon, my mother often muttered, I wouldn't trust him with the Good Lord himself without a confession first. He's far too handsome to be honest.

I always suspected she harbored a quiet affection for him herself— though she never would have admitted it.

Red River

These visitors were our link to the wider world, bringing tidings from Québec and Montréal. Though most couldn't read or write, they were living archives, memorizing events and gossip that would make them welcome in every lonely outpost they reached. We were glad to offer them hospitality — especially the peddlers, who often left behind a tin utensil or a length of cloth in gratitude.

Only beggars and gypsies were not greeted with joy. The farmers would point them toward our homestead and say:

—See that house over yonder ? That's the Ladurantayes'. You'll be received with open arms. They even have a beggar's bench ! We don't !

Indeed, our farm was the Lord's own house of charity. My mother would ladle a generous bowl of soup for any wanderer who knocked, and then open the wooden bench —like a great tool chest—stuffed with hay or straw, where they could sleep.

My father had built that bench when we arrived, to replace the one we'd lost in the drifting ice during the dreadful moving night from Trois-Pistoles.

As for the gypsies, we gave them space to camp their wagons in our meadow — not out of kindness, but fear. It was said they wielded magic, and no one wanted to invite a curse upon their livestock or harvest.

We even bought one of their baskets, woven from *red hart*⁵, for a few *chelings*. It wasn't costly—and we suspected they'd make up the difference by wringing the neck of one of our chickens. In fact, my brother Pacôme once caught one red-handed:

⁵ Red hart, hart rouge. A species of flowering willow. The leaves and petals were used as "poor man's tobacco."

Red River

—He tied a kernel of corn to the end of a silk thread, Pacôme recounted, and just waited for the chicken to come to him.

No doubt, that bird ended up in their stewpot. But we kept our anger quiet — for fear of reprisals.

Once, in my childish naiveté, I asked a young gypsy boy whether his people stole for a living.

—No ! We never steal, he answered indignantly. We're very honest !

Then, after a thoughtful pause, he added:

—Well... even if we did, it wouldn't be a sin. Jesus gave us permission.

I blinked.

—When ?

—At the foot of the cross, he said. When the Romans were nailing him, a gypsy tried to steal the nails to stop the suffering. But he managed to take only one. That's why they used just three nails for four limbs. To thank us, Jesus gave our people permission to steal—but only from outsiders. Never from our own.

My parents refused to believe that old legend. In hindsight, I realize how unfair we were in judging them. Their differences —cultural, generational, spiritual— made us impatient, even intolerant. Yet they held firm in their convictions.

Every year until 1845, a secular priest would arrive aboard the schooner and stay for a few weeks at the Jesuit mission in Rivière-aux-Rats. During those rare visits, he took the time to instruct both us and the Montagnais Amerindians in the tenets of the faith.

Red River

As for me, my days were filled from dawn to dusk with toil and sweat. Not a single second was left to boredom. The only moment of reprieve I allowed myself was a half hour each day with Malou. I was determined to turn him into a model of obedience and serenity.

We slept beneath the thick thatch of the roof, its scent earthy and comforting. My father had fashioned two wide beds with straw-filled mattresses — one for the boys, the other for us girls. This shared warmth helped us endure the bitter chill of winter. But such closeness came at a cost : the only true privacy I knew was the quiet refuge inside my own thoughts.

—Move over, Alexie — you're hogging the whole bed ! You're jabbing me with your knee, Louise !

Each evening, my father would stoke the cast-iron stove with dry wood. After warming himself, my mother, and the occasional unexpected guest snoring contentedly on the *beggar's bench*, the heat would drift up through the ceiling hatch, bringing a gentle, welcome comfort to our loft above.

We considered ourselves lucky. Many families had no separate bedroom at all. Parents and children alike would pull their beds close to the fire downstairs, huddling together like chicks beneath their mother's wing.



Red River

Chapter 7 **Learning to Read and Write**

Five years slipped away through our small, chapped hands — years scarred by toil and frostbite. Being the most indulged among us, I had a mischievous streak that both amused and exasperated my parents.

True, our lives were steeped in relentless labor, but I had learned to take joy in the fragile pleasures others often overlook : the crimson blaze of autumn leaves, the brisk morning air, the soft clarity of the Saguenay's waters ; the pine-scented summers, and spring's jubilant resurrection of all things green and generous.

~ “*What a beautiful land! I shall never leave it,*” I sometimes thought.

But one must never swear oaths — they rarely outlive the moment.

My third brother, François, was deemed by our itinerant parish priest to be pious and intelligent enough for theological studies. From time to time, the priest arrived by schooner from Québec City to minister at the Jesuit Mission, and during these brief visits, he taught François to read, write, and master arithmetic in preparation for entry to the Petit Séminaire of Québec.

—*You are clearly marked by the hand of God, François*, the priest would say, pointing a bony finger heavenward on Palm Sunday. *You are destined to serve your fellow man !*

So as not to forget his hard-earned lessons during the priest's absences, François proposed one sunny afternoon to pass along his knowledge to me. Every evening, once my chores were done, I would rush to the flickering seal-fat lamp —our only one, since the brighter porpoise-oil lamp was reserved for my parents— and sit beside him.

Red River

In the sizzling light of burning tallow, I read aloud from his thick prayer book and practiced my letters on scraps of birch bark or precious slivers of paper hoarded like treasure.

—*Alexie ! Wasting time again, are you ?* my mother snapped one evening, hearing me murmur my syllables. *Have you finished tending to the pigs and geese ?*

—*Yes, Maman ! But I'm not wasting time — I'm learning !*

—*Don't talk back ! You know what I mean. Too much learning makes one arrogant. People start thinking they know better than others, and then they lose their soul. It's easier to get to Heaven when you humbly follow the path others have walked. What use is it to man if...*

—*He gains the world but loses his soul,* I finished, a little too smugly.

—*Don't be insolent, Alexie.*

Within two years, I could read, write, and count. But I bristled at the rigid formulas imposed on me, the suffocating certainty of those who claimed to know what was best for everyone.

—*Be who you wish to be,* François whispered one night, now studying Latin and Greek. *You only get one life. Don't waste it becoming a copy of someone else !*

My mind wandered to distant lands. I longed to make something of those dreams that had stirred within me since childhood.

Then came a dark autumn morning when François, now a lanky youth, hoisted onto his shoulders the enormous *trousseau* our parents had scraped together through hardship.

Red River

He boarded the schooner bound for Québec, and the strict life of a seminarian awaited him : compulsory confession twice monthly, silence when comfort might have come through words, the study of Latin, Greek, English —and the threat of corporal punishment for disobedience.

He returned only six weeks a year, between August 15 and September 29, to help with the harvest. I saw him just once more before my own departure.

Dressed in his seminary uniform —a navy coat with white-stitched seams and a cap— he looked like a soldier in the service of Heaven.

During that visit, he described the harsh routine.

—*But how do they know if you've really gone to confession ?* asked one of my younger brothers.

—*You're given a ticket, François explained. Name and date. You have to submit two each month to the prefect, spaced at least two weeks apart.*

—*Oh! So you can't confess twice in one day and call it done,* Polyphème deduced.

—*Exactly.*

—*You'd try it, Polyphème,* Maman muttered. “Always looking for shortcuts.”

—*Intentions aren't sins, Mother !* he defended himself.

—*And yet Hell is paved with good intentions left undone,* she replied.

—*You'd know all about that,* my father interjected dryly, never one for mysticism.

Red River

—*In any case, Maman sighed, we all work ourselves to the bone so François can get an education. Do you even know how much it costs us ?*

—*No, I don't...*

—*Two hundred and fifty French pounds a year !⁶*

—*What? But I thought the priest paid for me!*

—*Not everything. We pay five pounds a month.*

—*That's not much !*

—*Not much ? All our work brings in twenty-five pounds a month. We give a fifth of it just for you!*

I refused to let these material concerns trouble me. My youthful soul was too busy dreaming — dreams ignited by François and fanned into flames of longing. Dreams of travel, of distant cities and untold wonders, shone in my mind like pale stars in a northern sky.

—*You know, I often said aloud, one day I'd like to see Québec City, Montréal... even New York. Maybe even Paris.*

—*That Alexie is completely out of touch ! my mother would exclaim. You'll get lost ! What nonsense ! Who put such foolishness in your little head ?*

—*No one, Maman. The thoughts came all by themselves.*

⁶ • In Canada, in the mid-19th century, one English pound was equivalent to nearly 25 French pounds still in use among many other currencies. The English pound was worth a little less than US\$6. The US dollar in 1850 was worth approximately \$25 in 2012.

Red River

—You should never have been taught to read and write. Now look! You think you're invincible. That's what I said from the start — education ruins us ! Knowledge goes straight to the head !

Poor Maman. She had heard those words so often that they'd become gospel. Her fears for my future distorted her judgment.

And so, by 1848, when I was just sixteen, my dear parents began plotting my marriage, hoping to “*tie me down*.” It was not uncommon, after all, for girls to marry at thirteen, even twelve, if nature had seen fit to hasten maturity. Sixteen was a perfectly acceptable age for a bride — even though the law considered a girl a minor until twenty-five, and a boy until thirty.

But I did not feel ready. I had not yet shed the skin of adolescence. And there was no question of surrendering my freedom so soon.

I chose, instead, to court solitude.

Christmas, 1848. My parents dropped the news with the bluntness of an axe to wood :

—Listen, Alexie. You're more than old enough to be married. And frankly, we're beginning to worry. Other girls your age already have children at their breast. Abbé Jean-Baptiste Gagnon has suggested a very suitable young man...

—What ? Who ?

—Augustin Tremblay. He's a blacksmith in Saint-Alexis, at the head of the Baie-des-Ha!-Ha!

—That's awful ! I don't want to marry a stranger ! You can't force me into this, Maman !

Red River

—We shall see! We shall see! We'll invite him over. But your father and I are of the opinion he's an excellent match. Besides, one always marries a stranger !

I was horrified. That night, I couldn't sleep in the shared bed. I tossed and turned, scouring every corner of my mind for an escape.

After two long nights adrift in sleepless dread, I decided I would take the bull by the horns. As soon as the weather cleared, I would flee — to Québec City, where my uncle was hosting Rémi Bernier of Cap-Saint-Ignace. Rémi, my secret lover.

He had visited us the year before with Uncle Ildefonse, and I had fallen hopelessly, recklessly in love with him: a handsome brunette whose sky-blue eyes held a quiet promise, whose cheeks glowed with the pink fire of the Lac Saint-Jean sunsets. Even his name echoed in my heart like a song: Rémi, Ré-mi.

I dreamed of him often. In those dreams, I dared to kiss him—at first with the timid longing of a child, then with the blind passion of awakening.

The taste of those kisses lingered on my skin for days. I came to believe that I knew him as intimately as one knows the rhythm of one's own breath. A life with him could not, I thought, be anything but as sweet and tender as his lips. I would go to him. Better to suffer for love than to suffer from never having loved at all.

—It will be heaven! I whispered to the stars.

I knew I was setting out on the great adventure of my life. I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted — but I knew with absolute clarity what I didn't want. It is always two or three small, stubborn choices that quietly decide the fate of our existence — whether gloriously or disastrously.

Red River

Fortunately, I was unconscious of the cliffs I was about to climb. Had I foreseen the mountains of hardship waiting to laugh at my boldness, I might have stayed, and the only life I had would have slipped away in the gray quiet of submission. Life is not a rehearsal — it's the one performance we're given.

~ *"I'll make it mine, this life!* I kept repeating to myself. *I'll make it mine!"*

I spent the week restoring the birchbark canoe my brother François had left behind when he went off to the Seminary in Québec. Since his departure, I had confided mostly in Pacôme, the brother with whom I shared the deepest bond.

I discreetly borrowed some slices of smoked fish and salted bacon from friendly neighbors, telling myself I might return one day, if my elopement failed to change my parents' minds. I packed a winter blanket, my warmest clothes, a few essential items—including a fishhook—and, crucially, a pair of trousers... and a Scottish flannel shirt Pacôme had left me.

—*It was cut from the Fraser clan tartan*, he said with a wink.

—*And what does that mean to us ?*

—*Well, the Frasers⁷ were an old Anjou family who settled in Scotland. We've got roots in Angers... So, who knows ? When do you plan to leave ?*

—*I've set my departure for the third week of May—seven days after my birthday. On the 20th.*

—*Why then ?* Pacôme asked, barely masking his concern.

⁷ Les fraisières.

Red River

—Because there'll be a full moon, and the slack tide will be at ten in the evening.

—Slack tide ? What's that ?

—It's when the tide is highest — still, and silent. The safest moment to slip away.

—But who taught you all this ? he asked, his eyes filled with astonishment.

—I asked the fishermen. I'm not sailing blindly.



Red River

Chapter 8 **Betrayal**

The last night at Rivière-aux-Rats had finally arrived. I slipped out of the long bed we girls shared, careful not to wake the others, and tiptoed downstairs by the dim light of a stuttering tallow candle. My lips whispered silent instructions :

~ *“Above all, don’t make a sound. Don’t wake the parents.”*

I cupped my hand around the flame to shield their closed eyelids from its faint glow. But the harshness of our life had at least granted them the mercy of deep, uninterrupted sleep.

~ *“Watch out for the iron plate,”* I murmured to myself.

I stepped over the sheet of metal that formed the base of our cast-iron stove, careful not to bump into the scattered furnishings of our humble home: a few pine chests, a massive table surrounded by straw-seated chairs, and our old *beggar’s bench*.

~ *“I’ll need to say a little farewell prayer,”* I whispered. *“I’ll need it.”*

I moved toward the engraving of the Sacred Heart affixed to the rough wall — large tree trunks stacked and caulked, whitewashed to reflect what little light the candle could offer. I could just make out the two faded bouquets of dried flowers flanking the holy image, and the twin altar candles, their forms grotesquely twisted by the flow of hardened wax, like the gnarled hands of an arthritic elder. We were too poor to afford a wooden or plaster statue; engraved images had to suffice.

Kneeling on the battered prie-Dieu, its padding worn by generations of imploring knees, I murmured a fervent prayer. Then I slipped out. The secrecy of my escape was an absolute necessity.

Red River

—*Tonight's the night, Pacôme, I had told my brother the evening before.*

—*Think carefully, Sis!*

—*It's already thought through, bro!*

He hadn't insisted. His role, after I had gone, was to admit that I had once spoken vaguely of leaving for Québec City, but that he hadn't believed I would follow through.

Trailed by Malou, who had joined me without hesitation, I crept through the shadows toward the pier where I had moored my canoe.

~ *"But where was it ?" ~Where ?*

It was gone. Panic set in. I struggled to think clearly, until suddenly my parents' voices shattered the stillness of the night.

—*Alexie! You've lost your mind! Thank heavens Pacôme had the good sense to tell us. You're going to get lost in the world. You're mad !*

For a moment I stood frozen, stunned, as though caught in a bad dream. My parents, seeing my hesitation, softened their tone and tried to coax me back to bed. But I had come too far. Once the shock passed, I darted into the woods like a hare startled by the hunter. Canoe or no canoe, I would find another. Every house had two or three.

Malou kept close as I fled into the darkness, branches clawing at my face, tree trunks looming out of nowhere. My father returned to fetch lamps, and that momentary delay allowed me to escape my mother, who dared not follow too deep into the forest.

—*Alexie, come back... You'll run into a bear! It's dangerous! Come back — we'll talk about your future !*

Red River

I stayed perfectly still in the underbrush, listening as the glow of lanterns flickered weakly through the trees. Then, as their calls grew fainter and finally ceased, I crept deeper into the forest. They must have gone home, planning to resume the search at first light.

I, meanwhile, made my way to Maxime Tremblay's farm, three acres away. I chose one of his canoes, loaded it with my bundles of cloth and food, hidden in a thicket, and brought Malou aboard. With a gentle push of the paddle, I released the shore — and my childhood.

—*Here I go... I'm sorry, Maman. I'm sorry, Papa!*

My heart ached. Guilt knotted my chest. But I reassured myself it was only for a few months. That thought softened the pain. Yet when I return, many years later, it would be to a different world. *Rivière-aux-Rats* would be called *Chicoutimi*, and tall buildings would tower where once stood our scattered log dwellings.

—*Onward... ever forward!*

The moment the current seized my fragile skiff in its grasp, I felt the pull of fate. The river carried me swiftly into the night, and soon the silhouette of our beloved home vanished from view.

~ *"The moon looks like the belly of a 'P.' It's the first quarter,"* I whispered.

With quiet, careful strokes, I paddled faster, eager to escape both pursuit and regret. The last faint outlines of the village — houses barely etched in *claire-obscur* by the moon's caress— faded quickly behind me.

~ *"That foolish Pacôme,"* I muttered. *"He betrayed my secret..."*

But deep down, I knew he had betrayed me out of love.

Red River

Chapter 9 **Escape by Canoe**

~ “*Let’s stay sharp, Malou. I hope they don’t come after us too soon.*”

In the hush of night, I steered my canoe with care, guiding myself by the faint silver ribbon of sky pierced with constellations. The darkness was immense, and I feared tearing the fragile hide of my vessel against a hidden reef.

To my right, the black, jagged silhouette of the boreal forest loomed — a grim companion, yet a reliable guide. My furtive escape was bound to rouse suspicion among night owls or sleepless watchers, who might take me for a ghost or devil’s emissary.

Though the darkness chilled me to the bone, I rowed on with quiet resolve.

—“*Let’s keep to the center, Malou,*” I murmured, “*we’ll ride the current with the ebbing tide. If my reckoning’s right, we’re moving at twelve, maybe fifteen kilometers an hour.*”

Malou, ever attentive, tilted his head as if trying to comprehend my plan.

~ “*By dawn, we’ll be far behind the reach of their worry,*” I promised him.

Perched at the bow like a Norse figurehead, Malou stood proudly atop a bundle of my traveling clothes. His imposing figure, noble and alert, filled me with a strange but soothing sense of safety. Each time I spoke, he would turn and give a soft yelp of encouragement.

Red River

~“*You think I’m being foolish, don’t you, my sweet brute?*” I said, watching his silhouette in the dim light. “*You may be right. But better to choose my own fate, even poorly, than let others chart my life without me.*”

Suddenly, I stiffened—a swimmer’s breath echoed in the silence. Malou sprang from his trance and growled low in his throat. But the intruder proved harmless : a curious seal, drawn to us by the foreign rhythm of paddle and wake. Discouraged by Malou’s growl, it vanished into the fjord, leaving behind a faint spray and a whiskered snort.

Three hours after our departure, the first light of dawn found us thirty kilometers down the fjord. The current was fading; time to land and vanish from sight.

~“*The tide’s slackening. Time to hide,*” I told Malou. “*We’ll rest here. If we keep drifting, they might catch us.*”

I knew my parents must be searching. The thought comforted me. Anything less would have wounded me.

We reached the northern shore, just beyond the peninsula that pointed into the *Baie-des-Ha!-Ha!* I unloaded the canoe and stowed it dry, dragging it into the underbrush and disguising it beneath a tangle of branches. Low water slack would last until about eleven o’clock; I would have to wait nearly seven hours for the high tide to return.

From a rise overlooking the water, I found an ideal vantage point. There, beneath a canopy of birch and spruce, I watched the fjord. I could even see the *Baie-des-Ha!-Ha!* itself — the place where the boy chosen to be my husband still lived in ignorance of the fate he had narrowly avoided.

I felt nothing but pity for him. Had I stayed, he would have suffered more than he knew.

—*Let’s take stock*, I said aloud, unrolling my pack with care.

Red River

I tallied my modest inventory : *Five smoked cod filets. Three slices of bacon. A pouch of tea. A few shillings. One sachet of willow bark*⁸*—for my migraines. Tinder and fire-starting supplies: three chunks of kindling, a whole tinder fungus*⁹ *I can slice into strips, a sharp flint chip, and a marcasite stone.*

The sun slowly rose and brushed away the shadows clinging to cliffs and crags. From my hidden perch, I scanned the shoreline with steady eyes, alert for any sign of pursuit. Capture now would be unforgivable. I had to remain calm, vigilant, wise.

Sharing a cod fillet with Malou, I kept watch. Around nine o'clock, a modest boat sailed upriver. At one, a barque laden with timber set off from the Baie-des-Ha!-Ha !

Then, movement. A flicker at the edge of my vision.

—*There they are*, I whispered. *It's them.*

Turning quickly, I saw the schooner —white sails swollen with wind— approaching from the north. My heart clutched in my chest. A wave of heat surged to my face.

Peering closely, I recognized them despite the distance. My father scanned the right bank. My mother, the left. So small now, and yet so vividly familiar.

⁸ Aspirin was first extracted from willow bark. Willow bark was then taken as an infusion.[Priv.Coll.]

⁹ Tinder fungus, or Ungulina fomentaria in Latin, is a parasitic fungus shaped like a tongue or horse's hoof that grows on oak, beech, and poplar trees. The fluffy orange part found inside must be removed after splitting it with a knife. Poor people used to use the orange part of tinder to paint their faces to make themselves look bad in order to "tinder" the bourgeoisie and encourage them to give them alms. [Author's note]

Red River

They reminded me of Monsieur Seguin's goat, who, from atop the mountain, thought the house below had grown unbearably small. I had just read the tale.

And now, these two loving souls—who would have given their lives for mine—seemed to me, in that moment, like predators I had no choice but to flee.

I ducked behind a branch, well hidden in the leafy crown of a cliffside spruce. They would never see me.

~ "*Poor Papa. Poor Maman,*" I murmured.

Their voices echoed faintly over the waters, bouncing off the stony shores of the Saguenay like the cries of ghosts.

—"Aaaaleeeexie! Aaaaleeeexie!"

I felt a sharp pang of guilt for being the cause of their anguish. Everyone was right in their own way. I thought that two or three months of absence would be enough to convince them to let me choose my own fate. Fortunately, I did not yet know that this would be almost the last time I would see them—for the future, as always, refused to bend to our plans.



Chapter 10
The Visitor of the Night

—"Aaaaleeeexie... Aaaaleeeexie..."

Their voices tore through the dusk, each cry a blade of guilt across my heart. I had set this anguish in motion. Everyone had their reasons, their own stubborn logic.

I believed that two or three months of absence would be enough to force their acceptance of my choice. I was young — and mercifully ignorant that this would be almost the last time I would ever hear them call my name. The future, always so carefully mapped, never follows the charted course.

—"Aaaaleeeexie... Aaaaleeeexie..."

The schooner skimmed past the wooded peninsula and continued its slow, indifferent journey, trailing behind it the desolate cries of my parents.

—"Aaaaleeeexie... Aaaaleeeexie..."

Those cries would follow me for years, rising unbidden in moments of silence, haunting my sleep.

—*We'll spend the night here*, I whispered to Malou, who slept curled on a carpet of pine needles. *Maman and Papa are looking for us.*

At my voice, Malou stirred, lifting his head to gaze at me with a trust so complete it shamed me. He believed he was safe because I was there. He did not know how utterly lost I felt.

Red River

—*You're a good boy*, I murmured, stroking his head.

By nine o'clock, as the valleys filled once more with the cold breath of evening, the schooner's sail passed again, a pale specter on the darkening water. Fear crept along my spine like a cold hand. Each rustle in the thicket, each whisper of leaves, made me flinch.

I gathered kindling and struck my flint against the marcasite stone. A spark leapt to life, catching in the tinder and licking at the dry leaves and twigs I had prepared earlier. In a battered pot, water began to simmer for tea.

Somewhere deep in the night, Malou's low growl woke me.

—*Don't move. Stay quiet*, I breathed into the darkness.

Out on the silvered surface of the fjord, a shadow moved — a man in a canoe, gliding soundlessly toward the shore.

"*Maybe it's my father*," I thought, heart hammering, desperate for rescue.

But no — the figure moved with stealth, carrying a heavy box. He disembarked near my shelter and, with quick, furtive motions, dug a hole in the earth and buried his cargo. I tightened my grip on Malou's muzzle to keep him from giving us away.

Moments later, the man vanished into the night, dousing his lantern and slipping silently back into his canoe.

I wrestled with my own terror and temptation. *Mind your own business*, my mother's voice whispered through my memory, *and the cows will be better looked after*.

—*Leave it alone, Alexie*, I muttered to myself. *Leave it be*.

Red River

But even as I reasoned, my body betrayed me. Drawn like a moth to a flame, I crept toward the fresh earth, my hands digging without permission, my fingers scraping the soil as if possessed.

By the fire's dim light, I pried open the box. Coins. A fortune glittered before me.

A sly voice in my mind whispered : "*Surely he is a thief. Stealing from a thief isn't a crime.*"

How easy it is to invent excuses when temptation is sweet.

But with a great effort of will, I forced myself to rebury the box, pressing the dirt flat, as if I could smother my own longing with it.

I wanted — needed — to remain an honest girl.

Weeks earlier, I had thought of asking our parish priest for a letter of good character before leaving Trois-Pistoles. But I would have had to lie to him, and perhaps he would have betrayed me to my parents.

"Too late now, I told myself grimly. In Québec City, Uncle Ildefonse will help me. And soon enough, this will all be behind me."

The next morning, after a sleepless vigil atop the peninsula, watching the empty bay, I decided it was time to move on. It was Tuesday, May 22nd. The tide would slacken in the early afternoon — the best moment to slip away unnoticed.

At dawn, I inspected my canoe: the fragile bark had held.

—*Come on, Malou, I said softly. Time to go.*

Red River

By evening, we reached a rocky point that guarded the mouth of *Baie Éternité*. The Saguenay stretched out before us, vast and implacable, flanked by towering cliffs that seemed to stare down in silence.

Now and then, the shrill whine of sawmills echoed from the river mouths, the only sign of human life.

Along the sheer banks, wildflowers clung to the rocks in bright defiance, their colors shouting against the grey stone. Beauty — nature's oldest and cruelest trick for survival — was everywhere.

The blooms swayed in the wind as I passed, as if whispering :

—*Good luck... and farewell...*

Crimson, gold, and green corollas clung to every crevice, turning the cliffs into tattered banners.

~*"This Saguenay... I thought, gazing in awe. This river is a marvel... and a mystery."*



Red River

Chapter 11

Recapture ?

It was around two o'clock when Malou sprang into the skiff, and my oars carved our escape into the cold, green water. Above us, the cliffs of the Saguenay rose like cathedral walls, sheer and vertiginous, casting deep shadows that swallowed the light. Beneath the boat, the fjord grew darker and deeper, a bottomless chasm that sent a tremor through my heart. I let the grandeur of it all lull me, almost forgetting the danger — when a cry, sharp and frantic, tore the stillness apart:

—*Aaaaleexiiie... Aaaaleexiiie...*

I turned, as if yanked by an invisible hand, just in time to see my mother, white-faced at the bow of the great schooner, her voice breaking on the salt air :

—*It's her! It's her! Georges! Georges! It's Alexie! Dear God, thank you! We've found her!*

Behind her, the schooner of Rivière-aux-Rats loomed like some vengeful spirit, gleaming under the sun yet heavy with menace. My father's voice joined hers, coarse with fear and fury :

—*Alexie! What madness is this? Come back! Come back this instant!*

But I answered nothing. I bent low and pulled at the oars with all my strength, desperate to reach the rocky coastline. From the schooner's deck, orders cracked like whips :

—*Beaulieu, Piette, Desrosiers, hoist the sails! Desaulniers, Choquette, cast off! Legentil, Beaupré, Monette, lower the rowboat! After her! Bring back that disobedient creature, sti !*

Red River

I heard my father, floundering and furious, shout curses into the wind:

—Tab... ! Stubborn as the Devil! She's gonna get what's coming, you'll see!

The deck became a maelstrom of movement. Even as I abandoned my skiff to drift, plunging into the sheltering woods, I caught a glimpse of my parents and half a dozen sailors leaping ashore in hot pursuit.

Malou dashed ahead, ears pinned back, a shadow among shadows. I kept him close, wary that in his fierce loyalty he might tear into one of my pursuers.

Through the forest rang their furious, panting cries :

—This way! No, that way ! Call out if you find her ! She's due a real beating, that little pest ! We'll teach her proper manners !

Their threats gave wings to my feet. If they believed pain would bend me to their will, they knew nothing of my soul. I had never bowed to threats — and I would not begin today.

Yet the woods are treacherous. You think you are running straight — and you turn in circles. The trees twist your sense of direction, the earth itself seems to conspire against you. Suddenly, I stumbled straight into the arms of two young boatmen who lunged for me, grinning.

But Malou's low, savage growl froze them in place. They hesitated, and that hesitation was all I needed.

—Come, Malou! This way!

Red River

Obedient as always, Malou snapped away from them and followed me, his heavy paws thudding against the underbrush.

—*Over there! She's heading east !* —the boatmen cried, but their voices grew fainter behind me.

I plunged deeper into the green chaos, branches clawing at my arms, brambles tearing my skirt. I ran until my lungs burned, until the blood sang in my ears — until at last, silence fell around me like a shroud.

Panting, I collapsed at the foot of a great pine, my mouth agape, my heart hammering against my ribs.

—*I think... we've lost them... but... oh Malou, where are we ?*

We were hopelessly adrift in that endless wilderness. Which way to the fjord ? How to find food, shelter, salvation ? Without my canoe, I was little better than a ghost among the trees.

—*We'll find it, Malou... or if not, we'll build a raft,* I whispered.

Two long days and nights we wandered. Hunger gnawed at me, but Malou, faithful and fierce, caught a small animal, and I tore a morsel of meat from its bones, enough to keep despair at bay.

Guided only by the sun, I pressed on, until the forest finally broke open to reveal a steep peninsula beyond the village of L'Anse-Saint-Jean. A cluster of wooden houses huddled there, fragile against the immensity of the cliffs.

—*Here, my brave boy... we'll rest.*

The tide had drained the fjord to its rocky bed, and the sea lay low and sullen. I scanned the glittering waters : no sign of the schooner. Not yet !

Red River

We crept into the shelter of the trees, some fifty paces from the shore, and I fashioned a bed of fir branches beneath a black sky speckled with stars. Hunger twisted inside me, but I dared not approach the little houses. News travels fast in small places, and I could not risk capture.

Malou slipped away into the night, silent as smoke, in search of food. He never complained — no whimper, no protest — only the silent, stubborn will to survive, just like me.

Above us, the heavens unfurled their cold splendor.



Red River

Chapter 12 **The Crime**

I must have slept for an eternity when a dreadful dream clawed me back from the depths of unconsciousness : a great tree had collapsed upon my chest. Yet when I forced my heavy eyelids open, I found no tree — only a writhing horror. A man, straddling me like a beast.

—*Oooohhh! What is that?!* I gasped.

—*Don't move*, sneered the man, clad in the garb of the woods and Indians.

—*Don't move, or I'll thrash you senseless.*

—*What do you want from me?... Help! Help! Someone, help me !*

My shriek tore through the forest like a wounded animal's cry. I thrashed with all my might, desperate that someone —anyone— might hear me over the drone of the nearby sawmill. But my assailant, barely a man, perhaps twenty-five, was muscular and stubborn in his violence.

—*Stop your foolish struggling*, he growled, clamping a filthy hand over my mouth to muffle my terror.

Mad with fear, I sank my teeth into his flesh. His howl of agony rent the night.

—*Come on ! Ouch ! You bit me, crazy witch !*

His rage exploded : a brutal slap across my face. Blood sprang from my nose.

Red River

—Shut up, you madwoman! Keep screaming and I'll show you what cruelty is !

But I fought like a creature possessed. I flailed, screamed, and managed to land a vicious blow under his jaw. He reeled back; blood welled from his lips where he had bitten his own tongue. Snarling, he seized my neck with both hands and began to squeeze the breath from my body.

—Let... me... go... you... criminal... I gasped. Malou ! Malou ! Come here !

Suddenly, like a bolt of gray lightning, Malou struck. The woodsman was hurled backwards by the ferocious weight of my faithful dog. In an instant, the man lay sprawled on his back, Malou's massive jaws locked savagely around his throat, awaiting the slightest signal to rip it open.

Frozen by terror, the man tried to fight back — but Malou only tightened his grip. Blood seeped from under the monstrous canines.

—Don't move ! I commanded, my voice steeled with authority.

The man stiffened, his limbs trembling under the dog's terrible pressure.

—Don't even think of struggling, I said coldly. *This is no mere dog. He's a malamute — half wolf. One snap of his jaws, and you're finished.*

—I... I won't move... Get him off ! the man whimpered, his eyes darting wildly.

I followed his gaze : a hatchet, a long dagger, a gun, a bow, a scatter of arrows — all abandoned at his feet before his attack.

Red River

—*Don't bother looking for your weapons, I said, tightening my grip on Malou's collar. If you even twitch, you'll die where you lie.*

—*I'm not moving, tabarnouche! Just call off that damned beast !*

—*Name yourself !*

—*Gaston Larrivée, he mumbled after a moment's hesitation.*

—*Where do you live ?*

—*Not far... L'Anse Saint-Jean... We built a cabin there for the summer...*

—*And do you often waylay women like some road bandit ? I sneered. I'll drag you back to your people and see how they like harboring a criminal !*

—*I'm no criminal, he protested.*

—*Oh, no ? Then what do you call a man who attacks a helpless woman in the night ? You're a thug, a coward, a disgrace !*

I scooped up his weapons swiftly. He shifted slightly — but Malou responded with a growl and a tightening of his deadly hold.

—*Ahhh ! He's choking me ! Tabarnouche !* the man gurgled.

—*Stay still or be buried here in the forest, you wretch ! I snapped. You'll pay for this. I swear it by Heaven !*

I turned to Malou.

—*Release him !*

Red River

Reluctantly, my great dog loosened his terrible grip. The man staggered upright, his shirt soaked with blood and Malou's saliva. His eyes darted toward the rifle I now held.

He dared to step toward me. In a flash, I cracked him across the face with the rifle's butt.

Blood spurted from his broken nose.

—*Go !* I ordered, my hand thrust toward the dark woods.

—*My canoe... it's down there, by the river,* he muttered, wiping his bloodied face.

—*Forget it ! You'll have to swim if you want to escape justice. Go ! Now !*

Without a backward glance, he vanished into the forest like the coward he was.

—*Go, Malou !* I said, motioning with my chin.

Faithful as ever, Malou chased the villain a short distance to ensure he would not return. Meanwhile, I made my way down to the riverbank, to the small canoe Gaston had so carelessly left behind.

His weapons I threw into the boat.

—*Malou !... Malou...* I called softly.

Within moments, my valiant companion reappeared, his fur bristling, his eyes shining with wild loyalty.

—*No schooner in sight,* I whispered. *Let's go, before night and danger close in again.*

Red River

And with that, I began to row, swift and sure, desperate to put this cursed place behind me.



History of French Canada, [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 13

A Bear in a Grumpy Mood

The afternoon slipped away in an endless battle against the tide that poured, greedy and triumphant, into the throat of the Saguenay fjord. By the time I finally reached its mouth, evening had begun to lower its violet veil upon the earth.

Exhausted but relieved, I breathed in the sharp, resinous perfume of spruce and pine. Before me, the vast St. Lawrence estuary heaved like a dark and living sea, its waves swelling to more than a meter high, rocking the edge of the continent like the cradle of some restless titan.

The black, soft waters of the Saguenay waged a desperate, losing battle against the greenish flood of the great river, which pressed forward with the slow, irresistible force of destiny. I dipped my hand into the water and tasted it.

—Well then ! Here you are ! I muttered to myself. *The waters of the St. Lawrence are already salted with the breath of the ocean.*

At the mouth of the fjord, treacherous whirlpools twisted the salt and fresh waters together in a reluctant embrace — a forced marriage, much like the one I myself was fleeing.

Choosing prudence over pride, I decided to camp on the safer, wilder west bank opposite Tadoussac. I hid my canoe in a rocky crevice, veiled behind the thorny branches of a wild rosebush, its crimson hips like droplets of blood against the grey stone.

Satisfied with my concealment, I made a nest for myself amid a fragrant plume of fir, cypress, and the silvery trunks of birch trees that crowned Saint Catherine's Peninsula like a coronet of nature's own design.

Red River

Above me, seabirds tore at the bruised sky with their cries, while from the deeper waters came the long, sonorous exhalations of whales, breathing like sleeping gods beneath the waves. The world was both brutal and magnificent.

—*Where is Tadoussac ?* I wondered aloud.

A veil of mist blurred the opposite bank, hiding the village barely a kilometer away as if it belonged to another world.

Malou, his nose twitching with excitement, set off on the hunt to secure our evening meal. Meanwhile, I kindled a fire, chasing away the dampness and the ravenous mosquitoes. In the flickering glow, I inventoried the spoils taken from the young bandit's canoe: a tinderbox of flint and marcasite, a plump partridge, a bow with a few rough arrows, a dagger, an axe, and a heavy, ancient musket — a relic from the days of the Carignan-Salières Regiment, just like my uncle Jérémie's old weapon.

Alas, there was no powder, no lead ball, no fuse. The scoundrel must have kept those on his person. If he dared to return to claim them, he would find me ready.

The fire burned low. Around eleven o'clock, a sudden noise ripped me from uneasy dreams.

Had the rascal tracked me down to avenge his humiliation ? My hand closed instantly around the hilt of my axe, my other reaching for the dagger. My heart thudded like a war drum against my ribs.

—*Who's there?* I cried.

From the folds of the night, a monstrous shadow surged forth — a bear, immense and wrathful, its jaws agape to seize me in a mortal embrace.

Red River

In a single instinctive motion, I swung my axe with all the strength fear and fury lent me. The blade met the beast's muzzle with a sickening crunch. Roaring in rage and pain, the bear wheeled around and fled into the darkness, its wounded cries echoing through the wilderness.

Moments later, Malou burst from the woods, teeth bared, launching himself after the vanishing figure of the bear to avenge his mistress.

—Bravo, Malou !—I scolded, trembling.—Always on time, aren't you ? Just after the danger has passed !

I sank to the ground, my clothes soaked in the blood of the vanquished beast, and laughed aloud — a wild, exultant sound torn from the raw edge of survival itself.



Red River

Chapter 14 Upon the Côte de Charlevoix

The next day, May 26th, I seized upon the rising tide and, around three o'clock in the afternoon, thrust my canoe into the embrace of the St. Lawrence. I portaged —no, *dragged*— my vessel over the stones and sand into the yawning mouth of Baie-Sainte-Catherine, that watery gate to the vast, unfathomable river.

The task was no small burden: treacherous reefs lurked beyond, and the deceiving winds, conspiring with the whimsical currents, seemed bent on luring me to shipwreck. I remembered the warnings from Tadoussac; they rang in my ears like ancestral chants.

—*Come on, Alexie! Row, girl, row!*

I shall not linger on the thousand blows with which I lashed the warm, living skin of the estuary. Terror gnawed at me, the memory of that rogue youth's assault still raw. I had learned, too cruelly, that even strength cannot shield a woman from every evil.

From that day forward, I trained each evening in the art of axe and dagger, hurling my weapons into the gnarled bodies of trees until I could strike true at four meters' distance.

With a heavy heart, I surrendered my former self. I shed my feminine attire like an old skin. My arms, thickened from days at the oar, and my waist, stripped of its girlish suppleness, no longer lent themselves to the image of a dainty maiden.

I unearthed a pair of pants and a tartan shirt from the depths of the canoe; they became my armor. I took a blade to my long chestnut hair, hacking it to shoulder-length, the way boys wore theirs.

Red River

—*From now on, I whispered, I shall be "Alexis," and not "Alexie," hissing the final "s" like a viper coiled for the strike.*

Nature, providential and impartial, had blessed me with a body not too brazen in its outlines —yet when I was adorned, I could still turn a head or two.

Greater dangers prowled than mere men : the wild beasts of the forest, whose hunger was as merciless as the tides. I slept with my axe nestled against my side, my dagger —naked and sharp— tucked beneath my meager pillow. It pricked my dreams, but its presence lent a comfort words could not. And always, Malou, my faithful wolf-dog, lay near, his silver eyes glinting with the loyalty of a valuable guardian.

—*Malou, my happiness is yours. Without you, I'd have been dead a thousand times over, I would murmur. And he, ever solemn, would tilt his noble head and smile a wolf's smile.*

Food was a daily battle. I survived by claw and cunning, fishing, foraging, and snaring what prey the wilderness could spare. Each morning, I wound a fishing line about my hair and tied it to a slender lock, so that when a fish bit, the tug would rouse me.

Fate, oddly kind, had placed a hook and line among the belongings of the defeated young hunter.

As for the river and its inconstant tide, they no longer bowed to my will. My father's words echoed through the spray :

—*A wise wrestler uses his opponent's strength to throw him down.*

Le bécosse.



Red River

Chapter 15

Captive

The Côte-de-Charlevoix lay sprawled before me, robed in endless boreal forest, its great pines and maples rising like sentinels under the wide sky. Now and again, a weather-beaten cottage, roofed with thatch or battered boards, clung to the edge of a clearing, stubborn as a prayer carved into stone.

Gardens, hacked from the woods by human toil, offered up their meager harvests to men who lived half in hope and half in hardship.

Evening found me slipping into *Baie-des-Rochers*, a secret bay nestled between towering cliffs. My heart trembled ; at any moment, the schooner that pursued me might appear, dragging me back into captivity. My father's voice, rough as rawhide, burned in my mind :

—*How can you be so stubborn, viarge ? She's gonna eat a damn one !*

In the distance loomed a large wooden building — a sawmill, squatting at the mouth of the bay. An island, large and heavy, clogged the waterway like a sentinel. The generous sun, reluctant to set, granted me a little time to make a fire, warm some water in a cone of birch bark, and hope Malou would find me a meal —hare, raccoon, whatever the wild would give.

While the water simmered, I practiced my throws, hurling my hatchet into indifferent spruces. Suddenly, from the shadows of a distant cabin, a woman emerged. In her hand, a smoking musket — wick alight, menace in her stance. My own musket lay useless in the canoe, bare of powder, lead, or fuse.

—*Who are you?* she cried, voice sharp with suspicion.

Red River

—*From Rivière-aux-Rats. Heading to Québec City, I answered steadily.*

—*Rivière-aux-Rats ?*

—*How far's that ?*

—*Far north, up the Saguenay.*

Her eyes narrowed.

—*You seem honest enough. But I don't like that axe in your hand.*

Without a word, I cast it to the ground. Slowly, she lowered her weapon.

—*Put out that wick, no sense wasting powder. I'm a woman too, I said, with a crooked smile.*

She stared at me —a long, dubious look— before dousing the smoldering wick with a flint.

—*Well, you're no showgirl, that's for sure, she snorted.*

—*Better to leave ornaments at home when you walk alone, I said coolly. I'm going to Québec to learn "good manners."*

—*Tough job, that ! she jeered.*

I smiled thinly.

Despite her rough manner, the woman —along with her husband who soon arrived— offered a meal: a fragrant hare stew. Their hospitality was blunt, but genuine... or so it seemed. They lent me a bowl and spoon after finishing theirs, wiping them hastily on coarse aprons. I ate

Red River

carefully, using the point of my knife to take greens from the bowl — mother's lessons in decorum whispering at my elbow.

At the meal's end, the woman approached, a ladle of broth and bone extended.

—*Here's a micouenne for your dog !*

Malou, all teeth and gratitude, licked the bowl clean.

They offered me a corner of their cabin for the night. Politely, I declined. “*Dawn, I said, would find me back on the water.*”

—*Why don't you stay a while ?* she coaxed.

Her husband's eyes flickered toward her — an uneasy glance.

Something coiled tight in my chest.

~ “*They mean to keep me here until the schooner passes,*” I realized. I feigned innocence :

—*If the schooner's coming, maybe I'll catch a ride. Easier than paddling all the way home.*

Again, that glance between them.

—*Got a backhouse ?* I asked casually.

—*Behind the garden,* the woman grunted.

I slipped away. Behind me, the whisper of plotting voices. Once inside the little outhouse, I felt the walls lurch. They were roping the shack shut !

Red River

—*Tabarnouche!* I muttered. *They're trapping me in the johnny house !*

Through a crack, I saw Malou, lying by the house, alert but confused. I dared not call him — his life might be snuffed out with a single musket shot. Better to stay silent, better to wait.

—*Think, Alexie. No, Alexis.*

My hands balled into fists.

—*I'll find a way. I won't endanger him —or myself— not yet.*



Côte de Charlevoix [Priv. Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 16 **The Escape**

The two rough foresters, my unwilling gaolers, kept vigil long into the night by the ramshackle *bécosse* [backhouse] that served as my cell. But in the end, the cruel fatigue of their brutal lives overcame them.

As often happens in such desperate moments, my mind raced, feverish and wild, despite the stench rising from the fetid pit beneath me. Earlier, I had noticed the crude shingles of the roof, split hastily by axe blows, their seams gaping like poorly stitched wounds. I bided my time.

Hours after sunset, the man on watch, bathed in cold moonlight and tormented by swarms of mosquitoes, slumped at last into sleep. Silently, I reached for my dagger — always strapped to my thigh, always ready. Through the tear in my tattered trousers, I slid it free and, with infinite care, pried loose a shingle, wary of the treacherous nails that jutted from the wood.

The roof was bound with ropes, but they were no true hindrance; a gentle push or a swift cut sufficed. Hauling myself up with the raw strength of desperation, I emerged into the cool night air.

Malou, my faithful hound, sprang to my side, his joy barely restrained.

—*Quiet, Malou — silence!* I whispered harshly.

Understanding flooded his bright eyes; he offered only a few trembling whimpers.

I crept around the darkened house, heart hammering, and found my canoe, cast carelessly aside with my musket, axe, and scant possessions — no doubt meant for delivery to the schooner's captain.

Red River

~ “*Why such zeal to return me ?*” I thought bitterly. “*For gold ? A favor owed ? Only God knows...*”

Without delay, I slid the birchbark canoe into the river's dark arms, gathered Malou, my few belongings, and pushed off into the tide.

“*Vive la liberté, Alexie,*” I murmured under my breath, and invoked my silent protector : “*May Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré guard my way, as she protectss all mariners.*”

With every stroke of the paddle, I pulled farther from captivity. The river, vast and merciful, bore me away. It was near three o'clock in the morning, and a ghostly mist hugged the water. The waves, once so furious, now lapped in gentle whispers. Hours later, as the first, pale fingers of dawn stretched across the sky, a strange tremor seized my canoe. It shuddered like a leaf in a child's hand.

~ “*What now?*” I gasped.

From the black water rose a spectral shape — a round, glistening mass, white as a burial shroud. Terror clawed at me.

~ “*Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, protect me !*”

For an instant, I thought the dead themselves had come to claim me. But then, through the fog of fear, memory returned : the old forester had once spoken of hunting white whales — gentle giants who greeted fishermen with almost human affection. He said, with bitter shame :

—*I felt like a pirate, flying a false flag to lure the innocent before slaughtering them.*

Clutching this thought like a drowning soul clutches a spar, I forced my terror down. The whale, silent and curious, soon drifted away, leaving me alone with the mist, the current, and the strange ache of wonder.

Red River

Yet wonder soon gave way to horror. A loud splash — then ragged cries carried by the rising wind — tore me from my reverie. I twisted around, heart hammering, and there, not two hundred yards behind me, loomed a grim sailing ship, overloaded with human misery.

A plank jutted from the rail, and from it slid a white bundle, falling with a heavy, sickening *ploof* into the river. I stopped paddling, my voice breaking free of my throat :

—*What are you throwing away ?* I shouted.

For long seconds, there was no reply. Then, as the vessel drew closer, a man in a black top hat leaned over the rail. In heavily accented French, he called :

—*We are Irish immigrants. Our island is ravaged by typhus. Touch not the bodies we cast into the sea — the disease will slay you as surely as it slew them.*

I reeled.

—*But why not bury them properly ?* I cried. *Why hurl them like refuse into the waters ?*

The man's voice, rough and sorrowful, was nearly lost to the rising northeasterly wind :

—*We lose dozens each day. If we stopped for each poor soul, we would never reach Québec...*

The wind tore him away, along with his ship and his horrors. From afar, I watched two more white-wrapped bodies slip into the deep. One drifted close. A shudder seized me as the retreating tide revealed a young girl, no older than myself. Her golden curls spread around her pale, naked face like a halo, her wide blue eyes staring, unclosed, at the heavens.

Red River

A great convulsion of horror wracked me. The joyous freedom I had tasted curdled to grief. Even the beauty of the Côte-de-Charlevoix, rising high and noble to my right, could not erase the image of that lifeless face.

By evening, I came upon a great bay, its shores scattered with humble dwellings and cultivated fields. Exhausted, I resolved to land.

—*What is the name of this town ?* I called to a fisherman passing by in his skiff.

—*La Malbaie !* he answered, his voice fading southward with the tide.

Several schooners lay anchored offshore, and the flats, immense and bluish under the climbing tide, began to vanish once more beneath the river's embrace.



La Malbaie [Priv. Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 17

Narcisse Doucet, from La Malbaie

Resolutely, I entered one of the two narrow channels that led to the little port. All around, long logs, like stranded leviathans, were wedged deep into the mud.

—Oh! Oh! Malou! —I warned— We must watch out for these runaway logs. A single one could rip open our canoe and drag us down to a watery grave.

The town, a charming nest of four or five thousand souls, lay cradled in the hollow of a fertile, river-bound valley. Rafts of timber, moored upstream near a sawmill, awaited their fate — to be sliced into planks. The townsfolk, warm and plain-spoken, extended their hospitality at once.

—Come with me! called out a man from the shore.

—Leave your canoe here by my jetty. I'll take you to Monsieur le Curé. Surely, he will offer you room and board.

I followed him with a reluctant heart. Some instinct whispered that I ought to flee while I could. Yet my legs, still shackled by old habits of obedience, meekly complied. He led me to the presbytery, where he introduced me to the priest, who promptly ushered me into his vast, somber kitchen.

At the old man's command, a half-breed servant woman, well past the bloom of youth, moved quickly to prepare our supper. She laid a white tablecloth upon a heavy wooden board — a fine cloth, delicate and immaculate, embroidered with the initials "N.D." in modest silver thread.

Red River

Without a word, she ladled a steaming vegetable soup into deep earthen bowls, slicing thin rounds of bread into the broth. It was delicious, hearty, and strangely comforting. Even my loyal Malou was not forgotten; he received his share outside the door.

—*Is the tablecloth embroidered with Notre Dame's initials ?* I asked, half in jest.

—*Not at all !* the priest answered, his jowls trembling with laughter.

—*Those are my initials. My name is Narcisse Doucet.*

—*Ah ! I see !*

—*But I must confess, he added with a twinkle in his eye, it flatters me greatly to share them with Our Lady. My humility should have thought of it sooner!*

He leaned forward, his gaze softening.

—*And you, my dear boy, where do you come from ?*

—*From Rivière-aux-Rats.*

—*You mean from Chicoutimi,* he corrected gently.

—*Yes, Monsieur l'Abbé.*

—*Chicoutimi falls under my jurisdiction, —he said with pride— My vicar tends to the Jesuit mission there one week each month. And your name ?*

—*Alexis de La Durantaye. I am journeying to Québec City to find my uncle... and to learn a trade.*

Red River

The fib rolled so smoothly off my tongue that it startled even me. I lowered my eyes with false modesty, softening the impudence of my lie with a demure smile. The old priest, far from suspicious, chuckled approvingly at what he saw as a display of charming innocence.

After the meal, he rose and rummaged through a massive ledger of baptisms from the Chicoutimi mission. Suddenly, he turned on me, his face flushed with astonishment.

—But... you are a girl, not a boy!

I dropped my gaze again and let the tears come, those loyal allies of my past scrapes and misadventures. Men are so often disarmed by a young girl's tears, especially if she is fair to look upon. I had learned the lesson young.

He scolded me at length, but his voice, despite its harsh words, carried the regretful tenderness of a grandfather who had been denied the joy of spoiling a granddaughter.

—If you tell me you ran away, he said, I promise there will be no punishment. But if you lie again, the consequences will be grave.

Faced with such a magnanimous offer, how could I resist? I confessed my escape. The abbé, delighted with his cleverness, decided to delay my journey. I was to stay under his supervision until the next schooner could return me to my family. He even promised to plead my case — to persuade my parents to abandon the idea of a forced marriage. I pretended to submit with all the docility I could muster, concealing my true intentions beneath a veil of gratitude.

That evening passed most pleasantly. He, unsuspecting, assigned me a small room on the ground floor. But as the "helm of the day" — as my mother poetically called the pre-dawn hour — approached, I awoke. While the abbé was absorbed in the solemn chanting of his matins, I crept silently through the darkened house. I found Malou sleeping peacefully

Red River

by the presbytery door and woke him with a gentle pat. Together, we slipped away into the mist.

Back at the wharf, my little canoe waited faithfully. The good-hearted Malbean had touched nothing.

The tide was low, and the river stretched before me like a silver ribbon. I rowed with the desperate strength of the hunted, leaving La Malbaie —still cloaked in sleep— behind me. A light breeze rose at my back, playful and kind, and soon the returning tide added its invisible hand to mine, urging me forward, faster, farther.

I was flooded with a vast and secret joy — the incomparable rapture of having evaded capture once again.



Narcisse Doucet priest
in La Malbaie [Priv. Coll.]

Chapter 18
The Beluga Massacre

The sun, like a capricious artist, brushed soft pinks and golds across the languid clouds, which drifted in the immense blue as if in a dream. The harmonious landscapes of the Côte-de-Charlevoix stretched before me like a living symphony, a country so intoxicating, a poet once wrote, "*it elates like Champagne, but without the cruel headache of the morrow.*"

After long hours of grueling navigation, my arms aching from the oar, I at last reached a sizeable island — Isle-aux-Coudres, as I would later come to know it.

—*We'll find shelter for the night*, I whispered to Malou, who tilted his noble head, listening to my voice as if he understood every word.

Along the shores, farmers bent over their fields, stoic and steadfast. I skirted welcoming coves and proud capes, where green hillsides were embroidered with buttercups, daisies, and poppies, and vast tidal flats shimmered like mirrors at the rim of the earth.

Suddenly, an unruly wind stirred from the southwest, carrying on its breath a foul, unbearable stench. Malou stiffened at my side, his nose quivering toward the unseen horror. Out in the channel, boats darted like sinister shadows, their sailors striking the water with the flat of their oars, raising a ruckus.

I called out to them :

—*What are you doing ? Trying to scare the fish ?*

One of the men shouted back:

Red River

—*They're porpoises ! We're herding them to the shore !*

But these were no mere porpoises. They were belugas —those ghostly white whales of the Saint Lawrence River— driven mercilessly by a cruel trap. Wooden stakes, pounded into the seabed, funneled the terrified creatures toward a sandy spit, an ambush of death.

When I drew nearer, a ghastly sight unfurled before my eyes : dozens upon dozens of beluga corpses littered the beach, bloating and rotting under the pitiless sun.

Some men were butchering them to extract oil, but many carcasses had been slaughtered needlessly, abandoned to decay, fouling the wind and poisoning the soul.

Thanks to a capricious shift in the breeze, I was able to land that night at the *Islette-de-l'Île-aux-Coudres*, where the stench did not reach.

At dawn, the shrieking gulls wheeled above us, rending the skies with their merciless cries as if mourning the massacre. Malou and I fled that accursed place, the horror clinging to my skin like a second, invisible flesh.

We drifted back into the embrace of the river, where ships ghosted past us with their proud white sails flapping in the mild wind like languorous sighs.

Yet not all was serene : a sudden splash, sometimes near, sometimes far, would ripple through the silence, breaking my heart anew —visions of those great blue eyes, now adrift and empty, haunting my every glance at the water.

Other ships sailed by laden with timber, dignified as floating cathedrals. I would later learn that these very vessels, after disgorging their Canadian cargo in England, would call at Ireland to load another, sadder

Red River

freight : the starving emigrants fleeing famine, stacked like cordwood for the New World. Profit found its harvest everywhere.

Not half an hour had passed when my baited line quivered. A splendid sturgeon, strong as a river spirit, tugged fiercely. I landed it with a cry of triumph and, ravenously, ate it raw. Malou feasted at my side, his tongue lapping hungrily at the flesh.

From the shelter of *Anse Gribane*, I decided to change my course. The memory of the charnel smell haunted me too deeply to risk another encounter.

—*We're going south*, I told Malou.

He thumped his tail in agreement.

We fought the entire day against the impetuous tide and the treacherous west wind. Every stroke of the paddle felt like a blow against an invisible foe. I had barely cleared the *Bout-de-l'Île-d'Orléans* when the wind, indomitable as a god, hurled me back toward a smaller island.

A poet once called the *Île-aux-Oies* archipelago "*the richest adornment of the St. Lawrence's waters*," but beauty often masks cruelty.

Twenty or thirty vessels clustered around the island like carrion crows around a fallen beast. From every foremast, the Union Jack fluttered arrogantly in the wind.

Exhausted and wary, I allowed my canoe to be driven into a gaping cove that yawned open like the mouth of some monstrous fish. Onshore, the island was littered with a chaotic tangle of wooden huts and military tents, thrown up like a makeshift camp.

—*Malou, we're going ashore*, I whispered.

Red River

And together, we entered the jaws of the unknown.

Memorial to the Irish at Grosse-île. [Priv. Coll.]



Red River

Chapter 19 **The Hell of the Irish**

I beached my canoe on the lonely shore, determined to find shelter for the night in this desolate haven. As twilight descended, I lit a modest fire at the edge of an aspen grove, its trembling leaves whispering in the cooling breeze. I boiled water and grilled a fine fish — a naïve guest who had invited itself to our meager feast.

From the mist, a man and a woman emerged, walking hand in hand, their movements hesitant, ghostlike. I ceased my axe-throwing practice, not wishing to alarm them, and offered a courteous greeting :

—*Bonjour, Madame ! Bonjour, Monsieur ! Fine weather, is it not ?*

They stood silent for a few heartbeats. Then the man, draped in a long black coat and crowned by a battered flapper top hat, replied haltingly :

—*Bonjour, Monsieur. You are quite right. The temperature... is very àlainn.*¹⁰

The curious phrasing betrayed them.

—*You are not Canadians, are you ?* I asked.

—*No, sir, we are Irish refugees... prisoners, rather, on this Quarantine Island.*

—*Quarantine?*

¹⁰ The word *àlainn* means *beautiful* in Irish language.

Red River

—*Aye. We are held here for forty days... Look there, young man — beyond the mists — do you see the endless chain of ships anchored before Grosse-Isle?*

—*So... this island is called Grosse-Isle?*

—*It is. And in that two-kilometer funeral procession, thirty ships stand idle, their decks crammed with dying souls. Some have lingered there for weeks, denied the right to disembark. The ships have become floating tombs. There is no more room on land, though thousands of tents have sprouted among the trees. Every night, the sea receives its terrible tribute : corpses thrown overboard by the hundreds.*

—*Mon Dieu... What has happened in Ireland ?*

—*A massacre, young man. A slow, pitiless massacre.*

—*A massacre ? Who is massacring whom ?*

The man in black lowered his voice, as though ashamed to speak the truth aloud.

—*For five years now, the potato crop —our lifeblood— has failed. Starvation stalks every village. Families cannot pay their rents. And so the English lords cast them out, razing the poor cottages the Irish built with their own hands. Nine, ten children huddling in the rain, sleeping in the mud of the forests. Hunger gnaws at their bones. Hundreds of thousands lie dead in the ditches, in the fields, stripped by carrion birds and wild dogs. Cannibalism has appeared in some places...*

I recoiled.

—*But this is the nineteenth century ! How can such horrors be tolerated ? Why do the landlords not help ?*

Red River

The man's eyes burned.

—Because the aristocrats — the Protestant English lords who own our lands by royal decree— wish to cleanse the island of the Irish. They mean to replace us with settlers loyal to their crown and their faith. And now the dead, unburied, rotting in the open, have summoned an inferno: typhus, cholera, smallpox — three plagues sweeping through the land.

— Three plagues at once? It's a living hell!

— You have named it truly, young man.

I struggled to contain my outrage.

—But surely Queen Victoria — she must intervene !

The woman, silent until now, gave a bitter laugh. Her companion answered :

—She knows. They all know. Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, turns a blind eye. Worse — he has decreed that Irish wheat, desperately needed to feed our starving poor, must still be exported to England. Starve or flee — that is the choice we are given.

—And so they come here... and to the United States.

—Indeed. But America has raised its head-tax to deter us. Ships are seized. Canada has become a reluctant sanctuary. Do not be offended, young man; the Irish did not dream of exile here. Circumstance drove them.

— And the shipping companies?

Red River

—They rejoice. Having lost the profits of the slave trade, they now trade in human suffering. Timber ships arrive at Liverpool and depart laden with human cargo — Irish flesh sold for fortunes.

— One man's misfortune is another man's fortune...

— Precisely. Each month, twenty thousand souls are wrenched from Ireland's bleeding soil. Twenty thousand !

I shook my head in disbelief.

—And the Catholic bishops? Have they not protested these abominations?

—They have — and for their trouble, Lord Russell brands them "communists", silencing them with slander.

He paused, then said, more gently:

— Yet know this : hundreds of your fellow Canadians have perished tending to my stricken brethren. I owe them a debt no words can repay.

— Thank you for telling me, Sir, though I have no personal merit. Would you... would you show me the camp ?

— Gladly, if you are not afraid. The young believe in themselves as immortal...

They guided me toward the heart of the island, where a tragic city of tents and rough-hewn cabins sprawled across the clearing. The two chapels — one Catholic, one Protestant — overflowed with the sick and dying.

We entered one of the cabins. Bunks were stacked like coffins. A man, reeking of dysentery, had fallen to the floor, too feeble to climb

Red River

back. His cries for help went unanswered by the others, whose hollow eyes bespoke their own helplessness. I heaved him back onto his bed.

In another hut, the foul effluent of a dying man in an upper bunk dripped onto the faces of those below — one of whom was already dead, his body cooling among the living.

I could endure no more. I stumbled out, gagging, the man in the top hat following solemnly behind. We stopped near the cemetery — a field of grief where thousands lay jumbled in mass graves, nameless, voiceless, abandoned.

An ocean of sorrow where a nation had come to die.



The Great Irish Famine, Dublin. [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 20 **The Corpse robbers**

—*Come*, said the man in the top hat, a shadow dancing in the firelight. *I will show you something worth seeing.*

He led me through the misty darkness to the foot of a towering Celtic cross — a stone giant, fifteen metres high, defying the heavens. At its base, a weather-worn trilingual plaque leaned like a broken prayer.

I read the English inscription aloud : *"To the sacred memory of the thousands of Irish who, in order to preserve their faith, endured famine and exile, and, victims of typhus, ended their painful pilgrimage here, comforted and supported by Canadian priests. Let those who have sown in tears reap in joy."*

—*And the French and Gaelic ?* I asked, still under the spell of the words.

—*The French*, the lady replied, *is but a faithful echo of the English. But the Gaelic...* Her voice dropped to a murmur as she translated : *Children of Gael perished here by the thousands, fleeing the yoke of foreign tyrants and an invented famine. May God's blessing be ever loyal to them. Let this cross-bear witness from the Gaels of America to their honour. God save Ireland !*

Night tightened its grip around us. The couple in black vanished into the gloom as if swallowed by a bad dream. They had been lucky — fate had spared them the invisible claws of contagion.

I must have been deep in sleep when Malou's urgent growl stirred me. His warm breath brushed my ear like a whisper : *"Wake, Alexie ! Wake ! There are prowlers among the dead !*

Red River

I opened my eyes to a grim scene. Three dark figures with trembling lanterns flitted between the silent tents. They entered one shanty after another, emerging quickly, their pockets heavier, their hearts lighter.

—*Thieves, I whispered. Stay, Malou. Watch.*

The lanterns threw brief, cruel flashes — a necklace glinted, an earring dangled from dirty fingers, the dull gleam of rings stolen from still, fevered hands.

—*My mother was right, I thought bitterly. The world is a banquet for the wicked.*

These scavengers, robbing the last treasures of souls who had already been robbed of life — what misery had left them, these poor Irish, clung to them in baubles, in tiny fragments of pride. And now even those were being torn away.

Rage erupted inside me like a spring flood. I seized my axe.

—*Come, Malou, I hissed. Tonight we mete out justice !*

I sprang forward, cutting through the shadows. As they stumbled out of a tent, their faces twisted in terror behind the wavering lantern light, I bellowed :

—*Hold, you filthy jackals ! Caught like rats in a barrel !*

One of them dropped his loot, jewels clinking against the stones. Another bolted.

—*After him, Malou! I cried.*

My brave dog tore through the darkness like a spirit of vengeance, barking with a voice that shook the trees. The fleeing thief, faced

Red River

with Malou's furious charge, turned and surrendered, trembling worse than his own lantern.

It took long minutes, punctuated by Malou's low growls, before I could make sense of their sputtered English. From their confessions I pieced the story :

They had smuggled themselves ashore from an English ship quarantined offshore — slipping down the anchor ropes, stealing by night from the dying and the dead.

Greed had outweighed even the terror of typhus, cholera, and smallpox.

I gathered the stolen trinkets, reverently depositing them in one of the abandoned huts — a poor offering back to the suffering.

When dawn, pale and sickly, began to seep over the water, I forced the thieves into a longboat under Malou's watchful snarl.

We rowed out to the looming hulk of their ship.

—*Fetch the captain !* I shouted to a sailor clothed in rags.

Soon a fat, weary man appeared, his face sagging with exhaustion, his French as broken as his spirit.

—*These men*, I told him coldly, *came ashore last night. They tried to desert.*

The captain sighed heavily.

—*Thank you*, he said, without much conviction. *We'll deal with them... Who could blame them for trying ? Every night, we bury ten more in the*

Red River

*sea. Forbidden or not, what else are we to do ? Bring the dead ashore ?
There's no room left on land or ship.*

I understood then the spectral processions of corpses drifting away on the tide — bodies returning, perhaps, to the mythic shores of Gaël, to the lost paradise of Avalon.

What a terrible, bottomless sorrow had swallowed this place !



“Children of the Gael died in their thousands on this island, having fled from the laws of the foreign tyrants and an artificial famine in the years 1847-1848. God's loyal blessing upon them. Let this monument be a token to their name and honour from the Gaels of America. God save Ireland.”

Chapter 21

The Legend of the White Lady

As soon as the corpse robbers had re-embarked with their macabre plunder, I fled those abominable shores without looking back, eager to leave their foul memory behind and resume my pilgrimage toward Québec City.

The current, more capricious along the southern flank of *Île d'Orléans*, urged me to seek fortune on the northern side instead.

— *So much the worse for the stench of rotting porpoises!* I muttered, tightening my grip on the paddle.

Navigating these sly waters was no easy feat. The currents, like mischievous spirits, played hide and seek between the islands, dragging me at times forward, at times back, as if to mock my ambition. Though by now my arms were seasoned and strong, I was forced at length to find refuge upon a sand spit at Île-aux-Ruaux.

At my arrival, a solemn crane, disturbed by my presence, hobbled away on its delicate stilts. I watched it vanish into the mist, my heart aching only for one thing: to reach Québec swiftly, to hold Rémi once again.

That evening, spent and battered by the river's cruel play, I disembarked upon the tidal flats of *Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré*. A few hardy log drivers still battled to free stranded timber from the river's clutch. I resolved to sleep under the open sky, nesting in a copse of trees not far from the old church.

The landscape was beautiful, serene even — but the yearning to find my beloved burned hotter than any campfire, robbing me of true rest.

Red River

The next day, the river bore me at last to the foot of the majestic *Montmorency Falls*. I sat in silence before them, my soul humbled by the roaring abyss, as the impish wind tossed handfuls of spray into my face, as if to tease me. It was there, amid the shimmering mists, that I beheld a strange and wondrous sight :

Two ladies, draped in splendid white lace gowns, dining in a clearing as serenely as in a ballroom. I gazed at them, entranced, my heart thudding as if I had stumbled into an ethereal vision.

So intently did I stare that the bolder of the two, laughing lightly, addressed me :

— *Young man, you look upon us as though you had never seen anything so beautiful ! Tell me, where are you from ?*

— *From Rivière-aux-Rats*, I replied, bristling slightly at the impropriety and vanity of her question.

— *And where, pray, is this mysterious river ?* asked the shyer one, wrinkling her nose in a charming grimace of disdain.

I made a halting attempt to explain, but quickly realized they cared little for geography; their questions were merely a game, a pretext to detain me. They offered me bread and supper, and, unable to resist their mischievous warmth, I accepted.

As we ate, the more daring of the two leaned close and began to recount a tale that seemed woven of the very mists that enveloped us.

— *It was in the spring of 1759*, she said, her voice low and musical, *that a maiden of these parts fell desperately in love with a soldier — young, handsome, and as smitten as she. But cruel war raged, and in a bloody assault at the very foot of these falls, on the last day of July, he was struck dead by a cannonball.*

Red River

— *My God, I whispered, aghast. How terrible !*

— *In her grief, continued the shyer girl, the young bride donned her wedding gown and hurled herself into the torrent, seeking to join her beloved in death.*

— *She was mad ! I cried.*

— *Mad with love, she answered solemnly, a love of a kind we no longer know — a love pure and fierce, not like today's tame and petty passions.*

I fell silent, humbled by her words.

— *They say her body was never recovered, the storyteller went on. And on nights when the full moon bathes the cataract in silver light, her spirit appears — clad in bridal white, floating above the eddies and whirlpools.*

The night unfolded like a dream, heavy with legends, laughter, and the sweet sorcery of these uncanny ladies. Yet, as twilight deepened, the boldest among them grew even more whimsical. She proposed, with a laugh half-mocking, half-earnest, that I disguise myself as a girl to deceive her husband — a notary in Québec — and thus safely enjoy her reckless company.

But though her beauty and daring tempted me, I recoiled. I would not humiliate either her or myself by playing the fool in her petty charade. My heart was bound elsewhere — to a nobler love, waiting for me just beyond the river's bend.

Montmorency Falls.

[Priv. Coll.]



Red River

Chapter 22 **Québec City, at Last !**

At the first breath of dawn, I slipped once more into the current, my canoe gliding like a wraith upon the sleeping waters. Slowly, in the pearl-grey light, a vision rose before me — vast, immovable, and crowned with spires — *Québec City*.

They had told me it sheltered nearly forty-five thousand souls, yet no telling could prepare me for this sudden colossus of stone and smoke, looming at the edge of the world.

My heart, so long lulled by forest winds and river songs, shrank and swelled at once, torn between wonder and terror.

At noon, under the stern blaze of the sun, I came at last to the foot of *Cap-Diamant*. The port sprawled before me, a living creature of timber and iron : masts tangled like a forest of the drowned, ropes creaking, sailors shouting in a Babel of tongues. Ships of every stripe packed the docks, their holds yawning to swallow beams and planks bound for the hungry island of England.

I tethered my battered canoe to an ancient mooring post, its wood scarred by countless tides, and cast about, uncertain. There, perched atop a mooring bitt like a king surveying his realm, lounged a man with a pipe clenched between his teeth and a glint of mischief in his eye.

—*Good day, sir !* I called, the river still clinging to my voice. *I seek counsel. I must leave my canoe and my few possessions until the morrow. I have come from Rivière-aux-Rats, far at the end of the Saguenay, and must find my uncle here in the city...*

The man exhaled a slow ribbon of smoke and shrugged.

Red River

—*And where, pray, does this illustrious uncle live ?*

—*Beyond the Rivière Saint-Charles, I said, at the corner of Rue des Sables and Chemin du Pont. His name is Ildefonse de La Durantaye. Do you know him ?*

He chuckled, a sound like gravel rolling.

—*Do you believe, lad, that I carry in my head the names of fifty thousand souls ? No. But no matter. I shall keep your canoe, your musket, your bundle — all of it safe. It's a long walk, and a heavy one.*

—*You would do this for me ?* I asked, wonderstruck.

—*Of course, tabarnouche! We must make small offerings to God, else He forgets us. I manage the Cheval Blanc tavern, yonder. Leave all here. I will summon a valet when my pipe is spent. It shall be waiting for you tomorrow, just as you leave it. And don't speak of payment — think of it as penance for my many sins.*

Such kindness, unasked and unstained by greed, staggered me. How often had I heard it said that cities were nests of villains, where innocence was devoured like bread ? Yet here, amidst the smoke and roar, sat a man whose heart still carried a spark of light.

—*May Heaven bless you !* I cried. *Surely, your sins are long forgiven !*

—*Follow the wall, he said, rue Sault-au-Matelot, and rue Sous-le-Cap, until you reach Saint-Roch. Then take Chemin du Pont. Cross the stream; your Rue des Sables lies just beyond.*

—*Simple enough, I said, smiling.*

He leaned forward, embers flaring in his pipe.

Red River

—But if your soul hungers for beauty, boy, take the Côte-de-la-Montagne instead. Climb high, where the Upper Town clutches at the sky. Find the Place du Marché, then let yourself tumble down Côte-de-la-Fabrique to the Lower Town, like a stone rolling joyfully downhill. Québec will unfold her secrets to you, if you dare the climb.

—I shall dare it, I said, fired by his words. But tell me — why is it called Cap-Diamant ?

He laughed, a low rumble.

—Because, lad, Québec gleams like a jewel atop her rock. Beautiful, hard, and unyielding.

—A diamond... I whispered.

—Adieu, then, he said suddenly, tamping his pipe against the stone. A cloud of smoke wrapped him like a veil, and then he was gone.

Adieu. Not au revoir. Adieu — the word of partings that stretch beyond this life. In Rivière-aux-Rats, we said au revoir — until we meet again. But adieu — that was for final journeys, for roads from which there was no return.

A chill brushed my soul.

Still, the sun was shining, and Malou barked joyfully at my side. Shaking off my unease, I gripped his leash and turned toward the daunting slope of the Côte-de-la-Montagne.

Thus began my true entry into Québec — a city of diamonds and smoke, kindness and mystery, where every step promised wonder... and peril.

And as I climbed, my heart beat out a prayer :

Red River

“Heaven, guide my steps — for I know not where this road shall lead.”



Québec City [Priv.Coll.]



Red River

Chapter 23 **The Big City**

After entrusting my faithful canoe to the tavern-keeper at the harbor — a rustic Ark that had carried me through river and tempest — I turned my steps toward the Upper Town.

Each footfall on the stone-paved streets sent a shiver through me. Until that hour, my soles had known only the dust of summer, the sucking mud of autumn, and the crystalline snows of winter. Here, beneath my feet, the very bones of the earth seemed tamed and ordered by human will.

The streets, murmuring with the names of saints, unfolded like a celestial litany; and it seemed to me that even Heaven, in its high serenity, could not have fashioned a realm more divine.

"Ah! My sweet Rémi," I murmured, "how shall I ever find you in this labyrinth woven by angels and masons alike?"

What mind, what soul, could have conceived such prodigies? The stone façades, layered with balconies wrought like lace in iron, soared skyward; families were stacked atop one another in these prodigious beehives, while in my distant forests a mere handful of cabins huddled in timid clearings.

Mansard roofs, sheathed in metal or cedar shingles, gleamed like shields beneath the sun, pierced by gracious dormers that blinked like watchful eyes. The windows, dazzling with sunlight in the day and shuttered against the night, blinded my senses: such glass was a luxury unknown to us, reserved for the merchant kings.

—*Who could have dreamed such wonders?* I repeated the words falling from my lips like prayers.

Red River

Churches rose everywhere, their spires like lifted arms, frail yet indomitable, pointing toward eternity. The streets roared with life : chaises, fiacres, coupés, phaetons, and cabriolets clattered over the cobbles; ladies, wrapped in delicate muslin and crowned with feathered hats, floated past like seraphs, while stout gentlemen in tailored suits exchanged nods heavy with silent conspiracies.

Above the din, pedestrians danced — nimble as minstrels — between rivulets of mud and islands of manure. Beggars in rags, peddlers bowed beneath their burdens, and wandering urchins, fleet as foxes, wove among the wheels and hooves.

—*Tabarouette !* I cried again and again, unable to master my astonishment.

Coachmen and postilions, drunk on vanity and dust, hurled insults at one another with the zeal of fallen angels. Their blasphemies bruised the air, and I half-expected a bolt of celestial fire to fall and silence them forever.

—*Poor wretches*, I thought, *they curse as if the heavens were deaf to their folly.*

Street vendors, those eternal troubadours of the market-place, trundled their carts while singing hoarse refrains :

—*Knives sharpened ! Bottles for sale ! Old rags for pennies !*

Children, yoked beside their mongrel dogs, cried out for buyers :

—*Pure water ! Good drinking water !*

One such child, startled by Malou's approach, cursed me roundly:

Red River

—*Keep your filthy beast away !*

—*He's leashed !* I protested.

—*Then move, yokel, before you break something !*

I stumbled forward, my eyes drunk on marvels. Sometimes, the cries of the merchants — worn thin by a thousand reverberations against the stone walls — dissolved into a vague murmur, like the sea whispering against a rocky shore.

—*I cannot believe my eyes!* I whispered again, as I watched a barefoot boy propel himself on a strange two-wheeled machine, swift as the wind.

—*Never seen a draisine ?* laughed a passerby. *Where do you come from?*

—*Rivière-aux-Rats !* I answered, with all the dignity of a lost knight.

—*Ah ! That explains the look of wonder.*

The city's laughter, sharp and pitiless, stabbed at me like a thorn. I learned to hide my awe behind a mask of indifference, lest I be mocked further.

Another grotesque passed by: a man gathering the city's refuse, emptying bedpans into half-barrels with a deft, careless grace that splashed filth onto his calloused hands. Woe to the house whose penny had been stolen by a nimble-fingered rascal — their chamber pots remained crowned with their shame.

—*Forward or backward, but don't block the way like a wooden peg !* a woman shrieked, as Malou and I hesitated.

On Rue Saint-Jean, the signs of the artisans hung like votive offerings: a plane for the carpenter, an iron key for the locksmith, an ox's

Red River

head for the butcher, and for the horsemeat vendors, a severed equine skull. Each sign spoke the silent language of craft and need.

Among the crowds, I saw hunger and cunning in equal measure : beggar women flaunting starving children before the indifferent eyes of the bourgeoisie, and ragged thieves whose glances clung like parasites to any jingle of coins.

—*You, my lad, I heard my mother's voice echo in my memory, you would not be given Communion without a long confession.*

The city widened around me like a dream. I reached the grand market square, where the *Jarrets-Noirs* — those peasants of Beauce ¹¹— haggled over each sou with the ferocity of wolves. Their clogs, caked in the black mud of sunken paths, marked their exile from their farmlands.

—*I shall have so many wonders to recount, I thought, when I return to Rivière-aux-Rats.*

Crossing the River Saint-Charles, I entered Saint-Roch and the suburbs beyond, where the city's splendid mask crumbled. Here, wooden houses huddled close, as if for warmth. The roofs wore heavy drip moldings like travelers' cloaks against the snow, and the windows — mere sheets of waxed paper — glowed dimly behind their shutters.

The streets clattered with the wooden clogs of workers. Above it all rang the crystalline clang of hammer on anvil : "*Re-mi, re-mi, re-mi...*" — notes as clear as birdsong, notes that seemed to call out to my heart :

—*My little Rémi, where are you ?*

I fancied that the hammer's refrain was a secret message for me, though I knew nothing of music.

¹¹ Jarrets Noirs = Dirty calves, because roadswere not paved.

Red River

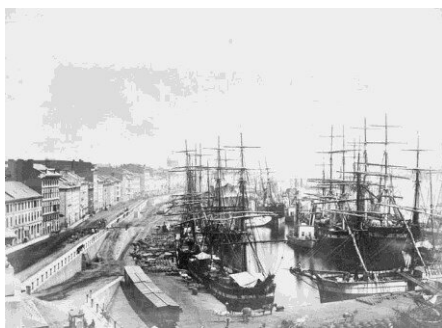
Saint-Roch bore other scars: vast charred expanses where fire, four years before, had devoured the neighborhood in two cruel assaults. Among the blackened ruins, new houses of stone rose defiantly, but the memory of ash lingered in the air.

The sidewalks here were raised high above the mire, narrow bridges above a sea of mud.

Wandering as though in a dream, led only by my thirst for wonder, I crossed the bridge to the industrial districts. The air grew heavy with the fumes of sawmills and factories, their chimneys stabbing the sky with black fingers. Still, the river, miracle of miracles, ran pure beneath the sprawl of man's ambitions; fishermen lined its banks, silent and patient.

—*Is it biting?* I called out, as in the old days by the quiet streams of home.

The fisherman did not answer. The city, vast and indifferent, swallowed my voice whole.



Québec City port. Priv. Coll.

Red River

Chapter 24

Rémi Has Disappeared

Led by the blind instinct of hope more than by certainty, I reached, at last, the entrance of Rue-des-Sables — that pale artery of the city where dust, sand, and forgotten dreams mingled under a sky already beginning to wither into twilight. Malou, my only companion, brushed against my legs, sensing perhaps that some decisive moment hovered in the air.

My heart, imprisoned too long within the walls of longing, pounded with a violence that shook my entire being. *Boom ! Boom ! Boom !* It called out like a wounded bird for my beautiful Rémi, he who had filled my nights with so many impossible visions of love and passion. And now — now, surely, I would find him, along with a shelter, a task, and some modest share in the future promised by the city's roaring factories.

—*At last, here we are...*" I murmured.

But the Rue-des-Sables was not a place one arrived at; it was a place where one was abandoned. Scattered hovels crouched on either side of the muddy street, their wooden faces scarred by rain and the slow gnawing of time. Sand and clay clung to my boots, as if even the ground refused to yield me passage.

I approached the first house, a miserable cube of wood, its planks blistered and blackened as though mourning their own decay. With a trembling hand, I pulled a string; a thin, dying chime answered from within.

A shutter banged open. A face appeared —if face it could be called— a grizzled wretch whose one unshrouded eye peered out with

Red River

suspicion and misery. His other eye was lost beneath a greasy black patch, and his whole person reeked of some ancient shipwreck left to rot in the sun.

Good God ! Could this specter be kin to my father ?

—*Good day, Monsieur*, I said, striving to master my voice. *I seek my uncle, Ildefonse de La Durantaye, and his son Rémi Bernier. Might they reside here ?*

The creature blinked, scratched his stubbled chin, and barked with a sailor's contempt :

—*Get lost, little brat! Ain't nobody by that name here, tabarnac !*

I scarcely had time to stammer an apology before the door slammed shut like the final stone upon a tomb. Startled, I recoiled; Malou pressed himself against my leg as if to shield me from an invisible blow.

Half dazed, I staggered across the road to a second dwelling, even more pitiful: a thin crust of wood masquerading as stone, a gallery sagging under the weight of its own hopelessness. I knocked faintly.

A tall, thin girl answered, her hair unkempt, her gaze sharp with distrust.

—*What do you want ?*

Once more I delivered my plaintive question, and once more suspicion met me like a drawn sword.

—*Mother ! Come quick !* she cried. *There's a boy !*

Red River

A woman appeared — a living specter, all bones and faded cloth. Her eyes, sunk deep into the hollow of her face, seemed to have long forgotten the habit of kindness.

—*What do you want ?*

—*Good day, Madame, I said, my words barely audible. I seek my uncle, Ildefonse de La Durantaye, and his son Rémi Bernier...*

She cut me off with a harsh laugh.

—*Never heard of them ! We've lived here for over a year !*

At these words, the last flickering flame of hope guttered within me. I pressed my hand hard against my breast, as if to cage the sob rising from the very marrow of my being.

But then, unexpectedly, the girl behind her mother stirred and spoke :

—*Wait... I remember. The man before us, he was called Ildefonse. We used to joke — Ildefonse la porte..."*

And her voice, becoming almost tender, added :

—*Rémi was so handsome... so strong !*

A wild beat of hope rose again, reckless and painful.

—*Well, maybe, muttered the mother indifferently. But they're gone, that's for sure. Montréal, or 'the States' — that's where everyone's running.*

I stood there, unable to move, the truth crashing down on me like the fall of night. The woman and her daughter retreated into the darkness

Red River

of the house, and the door closed without a sound. It was as if an entire world had been sealed away from me.

Where now would I go ? Where would I lay my head ? The vastness of the city yawned before me, a labyrinth without end, and within it, I was but a grain of dust lost in a storm.

Evening was bleeding out across the sky. A gasman, bent beneath his pole, touched the lamps along the bridge with tiny flames. They sprang to life, one by one, trembling in the wind like souls reluctant to endure the night.

I turned away from Rue-des-Sables, my steps heavy, my soul stripped bare. Malou followed without a sound, his tail drooping, his faithful eyes searching my face for comfort I could not give. We had eaten nothing since dawn. Hunger gnawed at my body as despair gnawed at my heart.

Somewhere, far ahead in the immensity of the unknown, my beloved Rémi might still breathe under the same wounded sky. Clutching that last, fragile hope, I vanished into the twilight — a solitary figure swallowed by the night, by sorrow, by the infinite, merciless city.



Rue des Sables in 1930 surrounded by low-income housings. Priv. Coll.

Red River

Chapter 25

Bandits

I had walked a long time, my heart heavy with weariness, before I finally yielded to the call of rest beneath the frail shelter of a wooden gallery. The heat of the day lulled my senses into a false security.

Through the latticework of the trellis enclosing the underside of the gallery, I gazed idly across the Chemin-du-Pont, where, beyond the dusty road, a noble residence of dressed stone stood proudly at the end of a verdant park.

It seemed to me like a relic from a bygone century, a vision snatched from a painted canvas : a stately edifice crowned by a central portico, pierced by a grand oculus, guarded by twin bell towers that framed the building like solemn sentinels.

—*These people must be very rich*, I mused.

A double row of maples, aligned like an Imperial Guard, unfurled their silent parade along the grand avenue. Four dormer windows, each adorned with graceful volutes, pierced the slate roof like heraldic crests, scattering the last fires of the setting sun.

Lying on the warm, beaten earth, my head resting on a rough log, my faithful Malou curled against my side, I kept my axe planted firmly in the ground within arm's reach, my dagger snug against my thigh.

Caution was the law of the hour : for the toothless, scarred faces I had crossed that day had left in my soul the vague imprint of lurking menace.

Red River

—*Woe to him who would think to harm me*, I thought grimly, my hand brushing the haft of my weapon.

Thus reassured, I abandoned myself to the languid flow of memories and regrets. Was *Rivière-aux-Rats*, after all, such a miserable place ? Even the rats there had a purpose — muskrats, rich with fur.

My dreams of Québec City, of Montréal, New York, Paris — all seemed suddenly threadbare. Elsewhere, the sky was no bluer than here, and happiness, no closer.

—*What folly brought me here ? I should have perhaps married that — what was his name again ?— that Augustin Tremblay, the blacksmith of Baie-des-Ha!-Ha !*

Despondency tightened its grip on me. Hours ebbed like the slow dripping of unseen tears. Only the memory of my beloved Rémi rekindled the faint embers of my determination. Love alone gives us stamina.

Suddenly, tearing through the fragile veil of my exhausted reverie, a scream !

—***Heeeellppp ! Heeeellppppppppppp ! Au Secooooouuurs!!!!!!***

I jolted upright, my senses sharpened by terror. Dawn had barely begun to paint its first frail hues across the heavens. Through the wooden slats of my shelter, I glimpsed a nightmarish scene : a large black chaise had halted before the wrought-iron gate crowned with stone lions. The horse, rearing in terror, lashed out at the air; the coachman wrestled with the reins like a drowning man fighting the tide. Before the open door of the carriage, a man masked in black brandished a pistol, his voice a brutal howl :

—*Stop, you cursed fool, or I'll blow your brains out !*

Red River

Another assailant, half inside the vehicle, screamed at a cowering passenger :

—*Give me your puuuurse, môôôdit ! Your purse or you're deaaaaad !*

Without hesitation, I seized my axe and whispered to Malou :

—*Attack! Attack, Malou! Go!*

My loyal companion, grey as a shadow and swift as a thunderbolt, flew across the street and hurled himself onto the back of the bandit. The pistol clattered from the man's grasp; he stumbled, struck the horse's flank, and was launched by a savage kick onto the dusty ground.

I leapt forward, my blood surging with righteous fury. With a mighty blow of the flat of my axe, I struck the second brigand at the base of the neck. He collapsed lifelessly onto the trembling knees of the wealthy bourgeois, who shrieked in horror :

—*Take this swine off me ! He's bleeding like a pig !*

With grim efficiency, I seized the bandit's ankles and dragged him onto the road. His head bounced grotesquely against the earth. From behind me, a desperate cry rang out :

—*Watch out ! Môôôdit ! He's gonna kill you !*

I spun around just in time : the first attacker, bleeding profusely, lunged at me with a dagger. I prepared to strike, but Malou, quicker than thought, sprang again and slammed him to the ground.

—*Malou, enough ! Lie down !* I commanded sternly.

The dog, full of reluctance and reproach, obeyed, settling onto the sidewalk with a look that seemed to say :

Red River

—*You, Alexie, are the death of all good fun.*

Meanwhile, the wealthy man, seized by panic, shrieked :

—*Open the gate ! Open, quickly ! What are you waiting for ?*

The coachman rushed to obey, and the carriage vanished behind the manor house, swallowed by the shadows of the park. A sleepy gate-keeper, his nightgown billowing like a sail, stumbled from his lodge and closed the gate with a muttered curse into his thick moustache.

Thus ended the assault — all in less than a minute.

Silence fell once more, heavy and indifferent. No one had thought to thank me. At Rivière-aux-Rats, a good deed sealed you to a family forever. Here, it earned you only forgetfulness.

The two bandits lay crumpled together like refuse along the Chemin-du-Pont. Blood darkened the dust beneath them, glistening like a grotesque mirror of the rosy dawn. A low, wretched moan issued from one of them.

I dragged their bodies aside, lest a passing carriage grind their bones to powder. Already, the thunder of distant hooves trembled in the morning air. The one I had struck bore a swollen neck and bled freely from the mouth. The other — Malou's prey — seemed closer to death than life.

I hailed a passing barouche, hoping to transport the wounded to the General Hospital. But the coachman, at the sight of the blood, whipped his stallion to greater speed, abandoning us without a word.

Just then, the park gate creaked open again, and a rider galloped forth, his voice flinging words into the wind :

Red River

—I'm off to fetch the municipal police !

—But these men need help ! I called after him.

—Too bad for them ! he retorted. They deserve the rope — not mercy. Monsieur Légaré told me to fetch the police

His figure soon dissolved into the misty road leading toward Québec.

Thus I was left alone — guardian of two battered souls between life and death. Malou slumbered beside me. I knelt by the wounded man and pressed a hand against the swelling of his neck. As for the other, I knew no prayer could now undo what had been done.

And so, beneath the waning stars, I murmured a last prayer — not for myself, but for the broken, bleeding remnants of evil that still, somehow, deserved to be mourned.

Victorian boggy [Priv.Coll.]



Chapter 26
At the Québec General Hospital

Two hours later, with the clatter of iron-shod wheels and the neighing of tired horses, a police van drew up before us. It was a large black carriage, grim and massive, whose heavy box was divided into two compartments serving as mobile prison cells.

In front, cut off from the prisoners, the coachman, an impassive figure, sat alongside a policeman, after securing his mount to a ring bolted to the van's rear.

—*We're taking everyone in !* shouted the policeman, his voice cracking like a whip.

Without the slightest concern for their bruised bodies, the two bandits were heaved aboard like sacks of grains tossed into a granary. Their groans were lost amid the hubbub of the Chemin-du-Pont, already teeming with carts, peddlers, and the dust of summer.

I was invited —or perhaps summoned— to sit beside the coachman on the raised seat, while Malou trotted dutifully along the wooden sidewalk, alert and loyal.

—*To the General Hospital !* cried the coachman.

The van lurched forward, its wheels screeching in protest. After much difficulty and jostling, the two stretchers were at last carried into the somber dormitories of the hospital. There, among the pale light and the heavy scent of ether and death, moved the sisters of the *Miséricorde-de-Jésus* — silent, ghostly figures, gliding like phantoms between the beds of the dying.

Red River

The Reverend Mother Superior herself approached us, a small woman in a flowing habit, with a gait at once hasty and precise, as if she feared to waste even a second that might save a soul. She introduced herself in a firm but gentle voice :

—I am Mother Marie-Joseph Sirois, born here in Saint-Roch.

Her words were grave, almost ceremonial.

—The wounded man, she said, the one who suffered the hemorrhage, has breathed his last. He bled out, poor soul. You must take him to the morgue.

The morgue —that dreadful antechamber of the other world— was located in a wing that adjoined the cemetery itself. The sister, her eyes lowered, warned us solemnly not to linger too long among the patients. A terrible cholera epidemic ravaged Québec City and showed no mercy, neither to the rich in their manors nor the poor in their hovels.

—We endured the horrors of typhus two years ago, she added with a sigh, and now cholera harvests our people. The Irish, poor dear brothers, have, without wanting to, brought us this scourge. May the Lord have pity on them and on us !

—You deserve a crown of saints, Mother, for working in such a hell, I said impulsively.

She smiled faintly — a sad smile, born more of resignation than of pride.

—Hell, young man, will be yet more terrible, she murmured. Look at all these little ones running about...

She gestured to the host of children who wandered the corridors, small, fragile creatures with pale cheeks and frightened eyes. Most were

Red River

Irish orphans, their parents claimed by the sea or by the pitiless hands of disease upon their arrival on this New World's shores.

—*I warn them, the Mother continued, I beg them to avoid the sick... but they are children, and children's hearts do not understand fear. Some fall ill, and their little bodies writhe in agony before the end. We Québécois have taken thousands into our homes, but how many still await the hand that will save them ?*

As she spoke, I gazed about me : corridors were crowded with the dying and the desperate. A foul stench, the very breath of corruption, clung to the walls. However tirelessly the sisters scrubbed and washed, they could not cleanse away the invisible rot that seeped from the bodies of the stricken. Here, more surely than anywhere else, Death reigned in majesty, choosing each day her share of victims with a silent and unalterable decree.

At length, the Mother Superior turned to me, her steel-blue eyes piercing through to my soul.

—*But you, young man... who are you ?*

I stood mute, overwhelmed. I did not know it then, but that simple question was to change the course of my life.

—*My name is Alexis de Ladurantaye, I stammered, from Rivière-aux-Rats... very far from here... I fear that — I fear I am responsible for the death of the man you have sent to the morgue...*

The Mother crossed herself.

—*Sweet Jesus ! Are you a vigilante or a criminal ?*

—*Neither, Mother. I was but passing by, when these two men assailed Mr. Légaré. Thanks to my dog Malou, we managed to rescue him.*

Red River

The Mother nodded solemnly, as if pronouncing a benediction.

—That is not crime, young man. That is heroism. We live our days in obscurity, and then —by God's will— we are called to rise above ourselves.

The bourgeois' coachman, who had been silent until then, suddenly cried :

—Ah ! So, it was you who saved us ! That night was a dream of terror to me. Everything was so confused... I had forgotten your face, as one forgets a footprint in the snow! Forgive me, lad! But I am certain Monsieur Légaré will reward you handsomely.

I bowed my head modestly, but then, another thought struck me.

—But, Mother, I asked, why did you take the body to the morgue, instead of sending him to his family ?

—My child, she replied, her voice lowering to a whisper, when a man dies unknown, when no one can tell his name or his kin, we expose him in the morgue... in the hope that someone — some friend, some relative, will recognize the mask of death before it hardens into oblivion.

She made the sign of the cross, as if to shelter us all from that terrible anonymity that swallows the forgotten dead who must face the Afterlife without the prayers of those who loved them.

And thus, I came to know the cold mercy of the General Hospital — a house of sorrow, a kingdom of ashes, a battlefield where the soul struggled against despair.



Chapter 27

A Certain Monsieur Ovide Légaré

After we left the General Hospital, the good-hearted constable was so generous as to drop us off at the gates of the great park. The door-man, recognizing the coachman, opened the ironwork without hesitation, and I led Malou inside — Malou, the valiant hero of the day.

Word of our arrival was sent to the master of the house, and scarcely ten minutes later, I was ushered into a salon whose splendor eclipsed all the meager dreams of beauty I had ever harbored.

I crossed a long corridor adorned with paintings that seemed like windows opening onto enchanted worlds. Several salons unfolded along its length, their fabric-paneled doors left discreetly ajar, as if to beckon the passerby to marvel.

Through the openings, I caught fugitive glimpses of marvels I had never imagined possible. My lips, incredulous, whispered :

—It cannot be! Who would have thought such wonders existed ?

At Rivière-aux-Rats, the sum of our furnishings amounted to a few rude chests, rough tables, and chairs. Here, in a few breaths, I beheld more treasures than I could hope to see again even if my life, which I fervently prayed would be long, were devoted to such pursuits.

My astonished gaze skimmed across crystal dressers heavy with painted porcelain and gilded china, sideboards overflowing with marvels of the potter's art ; massive cupboards whose half-open doors offered glimpses of immaculate linens, embroidered and damasked; delicate pedestal tables surmounted by ornate candelabra, their silver branches coiled with vines and heavy with candles.

Red River

There were chests of drawers with crystal knobs, sofas gleaming with carved wood and burnished varnish, deep armchairs so amply cushioned that they seemed designed for the repose of princes; tender shepherdesses with padded armrests fit for the most delicate princesses; tall clocks whose golden hands gnawed, *tick* after *tack*, at eternity itself.

There were libraries too — libraries lined with volumes whose virginal pages had not yet been cut, unread and untouched, like noble souls condemned to solitude. A beautiful book unloved is a sadder sight, I thought, than even a poor child neglected.

The walls, dressed in tapestries of rustic scenes, depicted rosy-cheeked peasants, rotund and smiling, whose plenty seemed like a satire of our Canadian farmers, who toiled in poverty and want.

Everywhere, pastel paintings and playful statuettes of shepherds and maidens smiled from every corner, anxious, perhaps, to distract from any melancholy thought that might arise in such excessive abundance.

Beneath my feet, the thick woolen carpets drank up every foot-fall; above my head, immense chandeliers, bristling with candles, promised to turn every night into a day reborn.

The very windows were so crystalline, so flawless, that I crushed my nose against one, thinking I could lean into the gardens beyond, forgetting that an invisible wall of glass still stood between me and freedom. And it was then, recalling the words of monsieur le curé about the rich and the eye of the needle, that I murmured to myself :

—Poor Monsieur Légaré... How guilty he must feel, dwelling in such splendor, while so much misery withers outside these walls !

Yet Monsieur Ovide Légaré, the man who inspired this melancholy reflection, was a paradox made flesh : rich beyond imagining, he bore his fortune with a simplicity and kindness that disarmed all resentment.

Red River

He was a man of about fifty years, short and stout, with a double chin that danced with every word he uttered. His eyes, magnified by eye-glasses perched upon a long Bourbon nose, shone with such sweetness and benevolence that one could hardly imagine malice finding shelter in his heart.

He inspired sympathy instantly; and I, who had been hardened by long misfortune, was charmed against my will.

I could not say whether it was the gentleness of his gaze or the enormity of his fortune that touched me more — perhaps both, for who truly knows the secret springs that move the human soul ?

At his entreaty, I recounted the whole of my adventure, the providential intervention by which I had saved his life. With a shudder, he admitted he had simply forgotten his purse that day, an oversight that might have cost him his life.

The ruffian, not believing him, had menaced him with knife and threat, searching for a treasure that did not exist.

—*My reckless distraction would have been my death*, he said gravely, *had you not intervened.*

Moved beyond words, he begged me to accept a reward. I refused — recklessly, it must be confessed, for I had not a *penny* to my name, and the proceeds from the sale of my canoe and musket would scarcely have sufficed for more than a few days. Yet ignorance sometimes protects us from shame; I knew nothing of what was to come.

Thus, my refusal, though born of a certain youthful pride rather than true detachment, delighted Monsieur Légaré. For as the cruel delight in the defenseless, so the greedy are often charmed by those who scorn riches.

Red River

Eager to know more, my host asked about my journey and my quest for my uncle Ildefonse. Of course, I kept secret the true reason for my odyssey — the beloved Rémi, whom my heart worshipped. A girl must have her mysteries.

And it was then, quite naturally, that I revealed that I was not a boy at all, but a girl disguised out of necessity. The shock was so profound that they all stared at me as if I had claimed to be a ghost.

—*Are you sure ?* Monsieur Légaré murmured, his eyes rounding in astonishment.

I explained, with some amusement, that a boy's attire offered more safety than a girl's on the open roads of the world, and after a few bewildered exclamations, they agreed. Nevertheless, Madame, scandalized by this transgression of the natural order, immediately presented me with a dress, urging me to resume the external form of my sex — as if, by donning it again, I might be purified of some grave sin.

Ah! How curious are the ways of the world, that what protects us is seen as shame, and what exposes us is called virtue !



Madame Légaré et l'une de ses filles. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 28

Mademoiselle Alexie is Very Pretty...

—Would you be so kind, Alexie, as to go and change ? You would give the servants quite a peculiar impression arriving at dinner so... attired ! You have almost two hours before the meal. That is more than enough time.

Thus spoke Madame, in a tone both gracious and firm. Obediently, I retired to the room prepared for me, but before I could assume the appearance of a proper young lady, I had to submit to an ordeal I had never before known: a bath.

A large wooden tub was brought forth, an object I had only ever seen used for the coarse laundry of families. Into it, the maids poured gallons of water, drawn steaming from the vast hearths of the kitchen.

All my life until that hour, we had feared water more than fire itself. Was it not water that carried the invisible armies of cholera, typhus, smallpox ? So the doctors claimed, and the specter of epidemics lent them credence.

My father, in his rustic wisdom, would thunder :

—Beware of water !

Thus, to protect ourselves, we simply changed our shirts more often than our sins, hoping to cleanse ourselves of the grime and parasites that made a second home of our bodies.

But here, under the eccentric governance of Monsieur Légaré — a man ahead of his time, who was mocked for believing in frequent ablutions — I was to be cleansed as if in preparation for a holy rite. He had

Red River

even installed three wooden tubs in his factory, where workers could wash after labor — a shocking extravagance to many.

Two cheerful maids set to work, laughing at my clumsy modesty. When I tried to undress entirely, they shrieked and pulled my jacket hastily back over my shoulders.

—Cover yourself, Mademoiselle ! Hurry ! Someone might see you !

One of them, stifling her giggles, guided my awkward arms and legs as she lathered me with soap. Bit by bit, the accumulated dust of many seasons floated away in strange filmy wreaths upon the surface of the water. I felt oddly light, like a bark stripped of its moss, exposed and trembling.

When at last the ritual was complete, they dressed me in a magnificent gown of lace and fine muslin, narrow at the waist and flowing at the ankles, adorned with pompoms, silk ribbons, and tiny jeweled flowers.

Emboldened by their indulgence, I enhanced my figure and the curves of my blouse with a few embroidered handkerchiefs I found abandoned atop a chest of drawers. A wide-brimmed, floppy hat concealed my unruly hair, letting only a few light brown locks escape to soften the artifice.

Thus transformed, I scarcely recognized myself — nor, it seemed, did Malou, who eyed me with suspicion when I ventured outside to bring him his supper. My new scent unsettled him for a moment, but loyalty soon overcame bewilderment, and he forgave me my unaccustomed cleanliness.

Upon my return to the salon, I beheld the effect my transformation had wrought : Monsieur Légaré, who until now had treated me as a foundling, now regarded me with indulgent admiration.

Red River

Noon approached, and he offered me his arm with a gallant flourish to lead me to the dining room.

—Your uncle, I fear, he began once we were seated, has likely departed for Montréal, seeking the path that so many of our people now follow — to the mills and factories of New England, made prosperous by the cruel bounty of the Southern slave states. England forbids us such prosperity here; they would have us forever consumers of their own wares, and thus, we are bled of our youth and strength, forced to cross the border in search of bread.

I listened in respectful silence, though much of these intrigues were beyond me. I simply said :

—My uncle has probably left with his family.

—Yes, most likely. Yet even this so-called Eldorado is uncertain. The Southern states, it is said, prepare to establish their own manufactories, using the cheap cotton torn from the fields by enslaved hands. They would produce textiles at prices the North cannot rival — and thus ruin the industries that now employ your countrymen.

—Would the French-Canadians lose their work ? I asked.

—Undoubtedly, he replied. And perhaps then, our own bleeding of souls would cease. But it would not heal the wounds England inflicts on us by forbidding our own industrial life. Our farms are overcrowded. We must open new lands — Lac Saint-Jean, the Saguenay, yes, but also the Pays-d'en-Haut and Abitibi.

—Maybe that will come, I murmured, thinking of my own wild homeland, raw and immense.

Madame sighed :

Red River

—Yet if the South becomes industrialized, the North will not abide it. The abolitionist movement is funded generously by the Northern magnates — not, I think, from pure hearts, but from the calculation that ending slavery will end the South's cheap labor and secure the North's dominance. All this may lead to civil war.

—How can they prevent it, if that is the South's will ? I asked.

—By stirring the conscience of the nation. By manipulating the masses with the gold of the banks. By kindling, in the hearts of men, a righteous fury — and leading them, blind and willing, into fratricide.

I shivered. The words conjured before me visions of burning towns, brothers locked in mortal strife. But Monsieur Légaré suddenly smiled and waved his hand as if brushing aside the storm clouds he had summoned.

—Bah ! Let us speak no more of these grim matters. They are too heavy for a young lady so charming. Tell me, what are your plans now, Mademoiselle ?

—I must first return to the harbor, I said, gathering my courage. I left my canoe and musket there. I will try to sell them to gather a little money, then set out for Montréal, in hopes of catching Uncle Ildefonse before he leaves for New England.

—My coachman shall accompany you, he said graciously, and bring you back here safely. As for your musket — I have a fondness for relics of the seventeenth century. If it pleases me, I shall buy it. If not, I know a man who surely will."

Thus did fortune, as fickle as the tides of the River Saint Lawrence, seem to smile on me once again.



Red River

Chapter 29 **...and even too pretty!**

In the golden haze of afternoon, Olivier Larocque, our faithful coachman, came to collect me to take me down to the port. Preferring the proud heights of the Haute-Ville to the shadowy alleys below, he justified his choice with a laugh :

—You can hardly get a handcart through Rue-Sous-le-Cap, let alone a carriage !

Olivier, once so jovial and at ease, had grown strangely timid since I had taken to dressing as a girl. How curious is the heart of man ! I have observed that even the strongest warriors, the boldest hunters, lose their words and stumble upon their courage when confronted by a young girl who pleases them.

I, for my part, have never known such tremors. In the presence of any man, I have always felt a sovereign boldness, as if armed by some secret right.

My mother, however, would often rebuke me in the tender tyranny of her love:

—A well-bred girl, Alexie, must lower her eyes before a man, feign shyness, and, if Heaven grants it, blush prettily. Only then will she be judged comely and virtuous.

To which I would answer, with a shrug of impatience :

—That's absolutely ridiculous.

Red River

—Ah ! Everything is ridiculous to you ! You are recalcitrant to good manners ! What shall we ever do with you ?

All these dear ghostly admonitions returned to me that day, fluttering about my heart like the faded petals of an old rose, as we paraded proudly through the sun-drenched streets in a handsome tilbury drawn by an elegant black horse, whose bells chimed a joyous music over the cobblestones.

Beneath a white leather parasol, its linen fringes shivering to the rhythm of the street, I sat well sheltered from the merciless sun. How magnificent the Vieille-Ville appeared to me then ! Every balcony, every fluted column seemed part of a waking dream.

I fancied myself a princess, perhaps Queen Victoria herself, escorted by her Guards in gold and silver helmets, their cavalry hooves striking the ground like the drumbeats of destiny. I closed my eyes and let the fantasy carry me, the clattering hoofbeats merging with the triumphal music of my imagination.

Olivier, meanwhile, stole glances at me under the brim of his hat, his face coloring with an awkward tenderness. Poor Olivier ! He did not know that most of my womanly graces were but artful arrangements of embroidered handkerchiefs under my lace blouse

Yet, in that moment, I felt truly beautiful — and what is beauty if not the magic one believes in ?

To the passing gentlemen, I offered the faintest smile, lowering my eyes with an air of modesty that would have filled my mother's heart with pride. Passing through the Place d'Armes, I stretched out my gloved hand towards the far-off shore, where the wide Saint-Laurent River melted into a haze of blue :

—Olivier, what is that town yonder, beyond the river ? Is it a suburb of Québec ?

Red River

—It is Aubigny, Mademoiselle, he replied kindly. And beside it, Lauzon, where they build ships as grand as palaces.

—Ah ! How marvelous !

Suddenly, the peaceful air was broken by the sound of singing — young men in fine dress swept across the square, their voices raised in martial hymns. They bore strange banners of *green-white-red*, or *blue-white-red*, and the hoofbeats of municipal constables echoed behind them.

—*Republican college students*, explained Olivier gravely. *They sing the Marseillaise, the hymn of 1837, to protest the injustices of Montréal.*

—*What has happened ?* I asked, a tremor of anxiety stirring my chest.

—*The colonial government mocks our people, Mademoiselle Alexie. It grants the French Canadians the same number of deputies as the Anglo-phones of Upper Canada, though we are more numerous. Injustice, wherever it festers, begets revolt...*

I thrilled, not only at his words but at the new name he gave me — "*Mademoiselle Alexie*". How fine it sounded ! How grown-up, how real !

A secret part of me whispered : "*Oh, why did I not stay upon the quiet banks of the Rivière-aux-Rats? Life there was slow and sweet as the river's song...*" But no! Here, life leapt and burned with colors I had never dared imagine.

The singing students, battered by the batons of authority, soon vanished into the teeming streets, their flags disappearing like dreams at dawn. The melodies of rebellion — the brave strains of *La Marseillaise*, the tragic lilt of *À la claire fontaine*— were swallowed by the great oceanic murmur of the city.

Red River

Olivier urged our proud little carriage down the steep Côte-de-la-Montagne, where the port below shimmered like a forest of masts, and the air was thick with the scent of tar, salt, and dreams. Every bowsprit, every forestay, bore the red flag marked by the *Union Jack*— a silent reminder of the British Empire.

—*Look, Olivier ! There ! Is that not the Cheval Blanc's tavern ?* I cried, pointing with an eager gloved hand.

I searched in vain among the labyrinth of beams, ropes, and crates for the tavern-keeper I had entrusted with my precious cargo. But there was no sign of him.

Olivier, seeing my distress, left the carriage and entered the tavern himself. He returned a few moments later, bringing with him a portly man who bowed and declared :

—*Mademoiselle, I have received no canoe, no musket.*

—*It wasn't him...* I murmured bitterly. *I have been robbed.*

On the return journey, Monsieur Légaré rebuked me with a sternness born of true concern :

—*You must never again entrust your treasures to the first stranger who smiles upon you.*

—*I swear, Monsieur, that I have learned my lesson — for life.*

—*Good, good. The important thing is not to avoid missteps, but to rise wiser from them. Myself, I always carry a few coins. Should robbers find me, they will be content with their loot and not seek my life.*

Thus ended my first true day as a woman of the world — adorned with dreams, humbled by reality, but more alive than ever before.

Chapter 30
Monsieur Légaré is Really Too Kind

That evening, the boudoir was bathed in a gentle twilight, and I found myself alone with Monsieur Légaré. Heavy draperies muffled the sounds of the city, isolating us in a subdued, almost conspiratorial intimacy.

He fixed me with a look full of benevolence —and something else, something I preferred not to name— and endeavored to persuade me to settle in Québec City.

—*Child*, he said, leaning toward me, *you know how to read and write... I should like to employ you in the factory offices. You must understand : literacy sets you apart from the working class...*"

—*Um...*, I murmured, looking desperately toward the window, as if the fading sky could offer me escape.

—*You know*, he continued, his voice lowering into a confidential murmur, *that I have always had a fondness for people of modest origins. My father, after all, was nothing but a shingle weaver¹², a humble cutter of shingles. Ambition, dear Alexie — ambition can lift you from the dust to the stars. And I*, he added, seizing my hand between his great hairy fingers, *I am ready to give you a hand...*

—*Ah !* I murmured, but it was precisely that hand which frightened me. *Why?*

¹² A *shingle weaver* in the US is a *shingler* in the UK and a *bardelleur* in French Canada. Those shingles are called *bardeaux* in Québec (*bardelleur*) and *tavillons* in France (*tavillonneur*).

Red River

—*Why ?* he echoed, as if trying to buy time, blinking with affected innocence. *Why ? Well ! Because you are clever, because you have potential, because...*

His words blurred into a confused buzzing in my ears as I frantically sought a way to free myself.

—*But... perhaps I lack the necessary qualifications,* I said, faltering.

He tightened his hold.

—*Stay with me,* he pleaded, his breath warm against my wrist. *I promise you will live in Québec City like a princess.*

The more his imagination blossomed, the more my soul withered. His eyes, emboldened by my silence, wandered from my face to the curve of my lips, then, ever bolder, sank toward the secret hollow of my bosom, as if they sought some hidden treasure. A sudden dread overcame me : could he see the silk handkerchiefs artfully arranged to amplify my modest charms ? I shifted uneasily in my chair, wishing to bury them from sight.

Embarrassment rose in me like a crimson tide.

—*I feel most guilty, Monsieur Légaré, refusing such... great generosity,"* I said, my voice trembling with an emotion I could barely contain. *But I must return without delay to seek my uncle Ildefonse...*

—*Ildefonse !* he cried, stung by wounded vanity. *What magic lies in this... this Uncle Ildefonse that you would reject everything for him ?*

His face clouded over. Rising brusquely, he walked to the door.

—*Good ! Then tell me — when do you intend to leave ?*

Red River

—*As soon as I have earned a little money*, I answered bravely.

—*It may take a very long time*, he retorted with a bitter smile, and disappeared into the shadows of the corridor.

I remained there, rigid in my armchair, my heart a battleground of fear and resolve. Carefully, I tucked away the treacherous silk handkerchiefs and whispered to myself :

“It is I —only I— who shall choose my destiny. Monsieur Légaré is too kind, yes, but also too old, too married... and too accustomed to commanding. I left my parents before I was of age, and I will not fall once more under the dominion of another.”

I had not yet understood that in life, if we do not obey a master, we must obey principles. But for the moment, the flame of liberty burned too brightly in my breast.

—*I will work here*, I resolved, *a month or two — no more! Enough to earn the money I need to reach Montréal !*

Thus was my decision made, firm and unshakable. No more than two months !

Suddenly, the door creaked open. Madame Légaré entered, her silhouette framed against the dim hallway light.

—*Ah! You are here*, she said, with a faint note of surprise in her voice.

—*Yes, Madame*, I answered, rising to my feet.

There was gravity in her gaze, a sternness that suggested she had overheard more than she wished to admit.

Red River

—I would like to offer you a handsome reward, Alexie, she said solemnly, so that you may leave for Montréal without delay.

—That is kind of you, Madame, I replied, bowing my head, but I would rather earn my living. I am no beggar."

—How proud you are, Alexie, she murmured with a sad smile. But know this: it is not alms. You saved my husband's life at risk of your own. It is only right we show our gratitude.

Thus, thanks to their generosity, my chains were broken before they had the chance to tighten around me. I was free — free to rejoin my cousin, free to continue the quest that my heart demanded.

—As it is summer, Madame Légaré added, you may choose between the mail-coach and the steamer. The boat is less tiring, but the coach is cheaper.

—I will take the mail-coach, I said, with the eagerness of a captive glimpsing the open fields.

—The stage leaves from Place-du-Marché, in the Haute-Ville, five days a week, she explained kindly. Every day but Sundays and Fridays.

Thus my escape was set into motion, like a leaf borne upon the wind of destiny.



Chapter 31
The False Tavern Keeper, a True Thief

The next afternoon, the coachman Olivier Larocque carried me back towards the winding heights of the Haute-Ville, accompanied by Madame Légaré, who wished to gift me a warm and elegant coat for the coming winter.

The day was clear but sharp, and the air carried a scent of coming frost. As we descended the Côte-de-la-Fabrique, where the spires of the *Collège des Jésuites* cast long shadows on the ancient cobbles, my heart gave a sudden leap.

— *Look, Olivier ! That man there !* I cried, clutching his sleeve.

— *Yes ?* he said, following the direction of my gaze.

— *It's the thief from the port !*

— *Are you certain, Mademoiselle Alexie ?*

— *As certain as I am of my own name !*

No sooner had our eyes fastened on him than Fate itself seemed to confirm my accusation. Before our astonished eyes, the scoundrel pounced upon an old lady emerging from the Collège gates, snatching her purse with the swiftness of a hawk and darting down toward the Côte-de-la-Montagne, like a shadow fleeing the light.

Without hesitation, Olivier halted our tilbury, engaged the brake with a decisive click, and leapt to the ground.

Red River

— *Forgive me, Madame Légaré ! One moment, Mademoiselle Alexie. I shall return shortly.*

With that, he sprang forward in pursuit, disappearing around a corner like an arrow loosed from a mighty bow.

The minutes dragged by, heavy with suspense. At last, after what seemed an eternity, Olivier reappeared, disheveled and breathless, one eye already blooming with a bruised shadow, and dragging the wretched thief behind him, twisting the fellow's wrist backwards with a grim and implacable hand.

— *Where did you hide the lady's canoe and musket?* Olivier barked.

— *I don't know that woman,* muttered the thief, defiant still.

— *She was dressed as a boy,* Olivier insisted.

Yet the villain remained obstinately silent on the matter. Finally, my heart —too tender to court a man's death— prevailed upon me.

— *Let him go, Olivier. I would not have a life extinguished for my sake. English law hangs a man for a trifle, and I will not be the cause of his death.*

Yet before releasing him, I could not resist a solemn rebuke :

— *Tell me, poor soul, why choose the path of thievery?*

Ashamed or feigning shame, he bowed his head like a guilty schoolboy.

— *Because I have no trade...* he murmured.

— *And why not seek one ?*

Red River

But his voice, hollow and evasive, betrayed no real contrition.

— *I have fallen into evil habits, he said. But I swear to you — if you set me free, I shall starve a thousand times before I steal again !*

I looked into his dark, feverish eyes —perhaps, windows, to a soul that had long since been lost.

— *You robbed a stranger, a lost child in a great city, I said gravely. It was a cruel thing to do.*

— *I know it, he whispered. By all that is sacred, I swear to amend my ways !*

Madame Légaré, ever the prudent guardian, intervened sternly:

—*First, he must restore what he has stolen.*

—*Show me your purse !* ordered Olivier.

The thief, with trembling hands, revealed his miserable fortune : nine piastres[dollars], seven chelings [shillings], and eight sous [pennies].

— *I had hoped to sell her canoe and musket for five dollars, he pleaded. Will you not take five and leave me the rest?*

— *No, tabarnouche!* Olivier thundered. *Debts must be paid before comfort is sought. That is Justice.*

Pale and desperate, the thief surrendered five silver piastres into my outstretched hand. I signaled to Olivier.

—*Let him go, Olivier. He has paid his debt to me.*

Red River

And so, under the indifferent gaze of the grey old city, the thief melted back into the crowd — a fleeting shadow among many, leaving behind only the bitter lesson that mercy, like justice, weighs heavily on the scales of the heart.



Chapter 32
Departure for Montréal

The following Sunday, beneath a sky veiled with high white clouds, I accompanied the Légaré family to the ten o'clock Mass.

The household was complete : Monsieur and Madame, their two sons François and Napoléon, all clad in their Sunday best, their faces solemn yet touched with that secret pride that only faith and respectability confer.

As we emerged into the pale morning light, a sudden shiver ran through me : across the street, leaning languidly against the stone wall, my thief watched me with eyes burning with hatred. There was no trace of repentance in that gaze — only a simmering thirst for revenge.

Yet, even then, I told myself that no soul is wholly black or wholly white; every heart carries its own secret dusk and dawn.

Madame Légaré, sensing my disquiet, leaned toward me and murmured gently,

— *If you must pack your things, dear child, you will, alas, have to forgo vespers with us this afternoon.*

— *I'm sorry !* I replied with a small smile, anxious to please her.

At Mass, Madame Légaré sat with distinction in a front-row chair adorned with a silver plaque bearing her name — the place of honor, once reserved for lords in the countryside.

She explained to me that each year, the chairs were auctioned with great ceremony by the *Conseil-de-Fabrique*, the beadle perched on a high stool crying out :

Red River

— *How much for this bench ? One piastre... two... three... eight... nine piastres... Up ! Up !...*

Thus did family pride drive men to lavish their modest fortunes merely for the right to sit a few paces closer to Heaven.

The next morning, at the break of day, Monsieur and Madame Légaré accompanied me to the *Place-du-Marché* to await the Montréal stagecoach. Monsieur, locked in a grim silence, had opposed this early departure ; yet I had insisted, wishing to secure a seat before the town stirred from its slumber.

The square, vast and paved, was flanked by noble edifices: the *Collège des Jésuites*, the *Halles-du-Vieux-Marché*, and the majestic *Cathedral of Notre-Dame-de-Québec*. Around them, the bourgeois houses dared to rise to three or four stories, their glazed dormer windows sparkling like sentinels of light against the morning mist.

We waited. Around a quarter past seven, a dump-cart creaked into the square, drawn by a slow, patient ox. The herdsman knocked at a heavy oak door; after brief words in hushed tones, a body wrapped in linen was brought out and laid atop the others already gathered. As the cart rolled past us, I glimpsed, under the shifting shroud, the pale outlines of five corpses.

Madame Légaré, catching my glance, pressed her hand against my shoulder :

— *These are the dead of the night... she whispered. Cholera stalks our streets, and we must bury the dead swiftly, without ceremony, lest we too fall prey to the pestilence.*

— *It is very sad*, I said, my voice barely a breath.

Red River

Coming from the deep woods, where the world's misfortunes seldom pierced the green cathedral of the pines, I had known nothing of this invisible reaper.

At last, around a quarter to eight, the stagecoach appeared, its bells chiming like little cathedral chimes. It was a leviathan of wood and iron, tall and rounded, drawn by six robust horses straining under their leather harnesses. Two men in dark liveries, their shining top hats crowning their proud figures, managed the expedition : the master coachman, and the postilion, whose long Gallic moustaches cascaded downward like icicles of hair, lending them a brutish, yet oddly tender air.

— *I shall entrust you to Saint Christopher*, said Madame Légaré solemnly. *He is the protector of travelers. Under his wings, you shall pass safely through the world's dangers.*

This was my first journey by stagecoach, and every detail carved itself into my memory with the sharpness of first impressions. Three compartments divided the vehicle:

The *coupé*, a forward bench open to the wind, where the coachman and a few hardy travelers perched.

The *interior*, containing the sacred trunk —the *malle or mail*— where the postilion stowed the mails destined for the seigneuries;

And at the rear, the *rotunda*, a rounded cabin enclosed on three sides, where those of gentler birth sheltered from dust and rain.

On the roof, under a billowing leather tarpaulin, bundles, trunks, and battered valises were lashed tightly together. A few poor wretches, unable to afford proper seats, clung to the ropes atop this precarious mountain, like shipwrecked souls adrift on a sea of luggage.

Had I not met Monsieur and Madame Légaré, I would no doubt have been among them.

Red River

The night before, Madame Légaré had discreetly slipped a leather purse under my dress, tying it around my waist with a hidden belt. It made my waist rounder, but in matters of survival, vanity has no place.

—*Take your place, young lady !* cried the coachman, snapping his whip in impatience.

Madame Légaré embraced me fiercely, as if to graft her heart onto mine ; Monsieur, still stoic, shook my hand with a gravity that bespoke both pride and sorrow. I begged the coachman to let me ride in the *coupé*, beside him, to watch over Malou, who was to follow us on foot. He, surprised, consented at first, but Monsieur Légaré intervened with sudden authority :

— *No, Alexie! No daughter of the Légaré family shall ride exposed like a peasant girl ! Get into the rotunda !*

Smiling through my disappointment, I obeyed. Gratitude demanded it.

—***Forward !*** cried the coachman, his voice cutting the morning like a sword.

With a thunder of hooves, the stagecoach lurched into motion. Madame Légaré, her silk handkerchief pressed to her eyes, vanished from view ; Monsieur, remained upright, hand raised in a final, solemn benediction.

Malou trotted loyally alongside, his coat bristling with life. He was denied a place within the coach, for the fearsome glint in his wild eyes and the unbending stiffness of his fur made him a formidable sight to any civilized traveler.

We rumbled along the *Rue-de-Buade*, brushing the cathedral's shadow, turned into *Rue-du-Fort*, and took the *Chemin-Saint-Louis* — the great artery leading southwest to Montréal. The young postilion,

Red River

perched on the hindmost horse, cracked his long whip, guiding the six beasts with an expertise that was a kind of wild ballet.

I left Québec without seeing my brother François, a boarder at the Petit Séminaire.¹³ I feared that his tender conscience, tormented by confession, might betray my flight back to our iron-handed family.

— *No, I thought. There could be no turning back to Rivière-aux-Rats, for the time being !*

As we entered the Chemin-Saint-Louis, a man lifted the brim of his wide hat and revealed, beneath it, the twisted smile of my old thief. He stared at me with venomous hatred as we rattled past. Malou, galloping loyally at our side, nearly collided with him, and the villain recoiled instinctively from the animal's feral glare before slinking away into the crowd.



¹³ The Junior Seminary.

Chapter 33
Along the Chemin du Roy

When the good Légaré family, with their touching kindness, had vanished behind the massive shadow of Notre-Dame Cathedral, and there was no longer any need to express cheerfulness out of gratitude, I allowed myself the furtive luxury of a final tear, which I swiftly wiped away with the back of my hand.

I then drew a long, trembling breath, as though to fill the sudden emptiness in my chest, and cast a glance at Malou, my faithful gray wolf, who was trotting with gentle devotion behind the swaying diligence.

At first, poor Malou, who appeared so fierce to passersby yet whose soul was tender as a child's, showed signs of panic. Time and again he lifted his worried eyes toward the rotunda's window, seeking my image behind the glass.

But as the leagues unrolled behind us like the ribbon of a lost memory, he grew calmer, and it seemed he came to believe, in his simple, loyal heart, that the entire stagecoach was the moving sanctuary of his mistress.

As long as the pavement held firm beneath us, the diligence advanced with the solemn, deliberate pace of a funeral cortege — one league per hour, as the old travelers say. We passed beneath the thick ramparts and the dry moats of the Vauban citadel, where my neighbor, a somber-looking man with a voice like a funeral bell, caught sight of the Union Jack flapping defiantly at the masthead. His face darkened, and, with the tragic intonation of a man about to be led to the scaffold, he declaimed :

Red River

—*The French seize Abd el-Kader to seal their conquest of Ottoman Algeria. The British plunder the Punjab, rob the Boers of South Africa, wage shameless war on China to poison its people with opium... And the Americans ? They tear California from Mexico like wolves stripping flesh from bone. Ah ! This nineteenth century is the age of brigandage and moral shipwreck !*

Although his powerful voice rose above the savage rumble of the iron wheels, no one deigned to answer — not even the fiery-haired soldier sitting stiffly at his side, who affected not to hear. In proud silence, the diligence creaked onward, crossed the city walls through the *Porte-Saint-Louis*, and gained the open breath of the *Plains of Abraham*.

There, as if sighing with relief, the great carriage burst free of the oppressive embrace of the city. The cobbles disappeared as if by some fairy enchantment, leaving the wheels to sing upon the hardened earth. The tumult softened into a gentle crackling, through which human voices could once again weave their fragile murmurs.

Here and there, cautious patches of paving stones warned of the treacherous bogs that formed after rain, but the sun now ruled the skies, and our postilion veered skillfully over the firm ground, steering clear of the rocky traps that would have deafened us anew.

—*We can finally hear ourselves speak !* exclaimed the tireless gossips, as if the silence of nature had been designed for their benefit.

Inside the rotunda, upholstered in blue velvet whose tired elegance bore the stains of countless hands, sat six souls : five men, and myself, their lone feminine presence. From the domed ceiling dangled yellow woolen pompoms, gray with the dust of a thousand voyages, which passengers seized to steady themselves over rough patches.

The other travelers carried about them the discreet but unmistakable aura of comfort and wealth. So too, perhaps, did I — at least to the casual glance. My flowing white dress, rich with lace, tassels, and

Red River

embroidery, bespoke refinement ; my large hat, adorned with an aigrette whose delicate plumes trembled with every jolt, lent me an air of frivolous nobility.

Yet beneath these borrowed splendors, I had not forgotten the humble wood-girl I truly was. In a bundle at my feet, wrapped with practical care, lay my boy's garments, my faithful axe, and my dagger — relics of my wild innocence and my ever-threatened virtue. My rough manners, too, risked betraying me at any moment. Thus, with all the gravity of a soldier in an enemy country, I held my tongue and kept my posture stiff and aloof, lest the well-bred faces around me glimpse the untamed spirit hidden beneath my silk and feathers.

It seemed to me that some among them might have done better to imitate my discretion, for their idle chatter drifted like smoke, graceless and vain, through the carriage. And I recalled, with a bittersweet smile, the wisdom of my Aunt Ursula :

—Among those who have nothing to say, the most agreeable are those who remain silent.



Chemin du Roy between Québec City and Montréal. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 34

Madame Légaré's Farewell Gift

The evening before my departure, Madame Légaré, with that mixture of affection and discreet urgency that only a woman's heart can convey, pressed into my hands a heavy purse of two hundred piastres — a sum so vast to my modest eyes that it seemed almost a royal ransom. It was her reward, she said, for having saved the life of her beloved husband.

But in truth, I suspected that, beneath the noble gesture, there stirred a subtler motive : a desire to see me gone, before her husband, so impressionable and so easily ensnared by youthful charm, made a misstep that no one could undo.

That night, in the silence of my chamber, while the whale-oil lamp flickered like a dying soul against the dark, I spread my fortune upon the bed as a miser might contemplate his hoard, or a prisoner his long-awaited passport to freedom. There, they shone before me, those coins of distant lands and ancient kings, each a key to a thousand new doors. American dollars, proud and new; solemn pounds sterling and their lesser silver shillings; heavy copper pennies; gleaming gold sovereigns and guineas — that bitter gold born from the blood of slaves along the Gulf of Guinea.

I marveled too at the relics of another era, dear to my heart : old French coins from the vanished days of New France — a louis d'or, an écu, a livre, a scattering of deniers and sols, dimmed by the patina of time. And the Spanish doubloons, pistoles, and reals — those wanderers from South America, whose imprints of the Pillars of Hercules, slashed across the figure eight, would one day inspire the symbol of our own dollars, struck many years hence in 1866.

At the sight of such a treasure, my heart heaved a sigh of relief.

Red River

—*I am safe from want*, I whispered to the shadows.

For is it not true that money, more than it enslaves, grants wings to our desires ?

Yet I was not so naïve as to ignore the perils it concealed. I knew, with the instinct of those born poor, how cunning merchants and sly bankers could rob the simple of their hard-won gains.

—*That's all I can give you for your money, Madame, else I'd be ruined myself*, they would purr, masking avarice in false benevolence.

No — I must be wary. Madame Légaré, in the secret wisdom of her sex, had entrusted me with her own savings, not merely to reward me, but to hasten my departure — to place an ocean of leagues between me and the temptation that loomed too near her household hearth.

And so it was that I boarded the stagecoach with light heart and heavier purse, my faithful Malou loping gallantly behind us. The heavy diligence rolled along the rough *Chemin du Roy*, groaning at every rut and stone, its wheels laboring as if burdened by the memories of centuries.

Seated across from me, feigning indifference to the coarse jokes of another passenger, was a stout gentleman of florid complexion, whose manners betrayed both wealth and vanity.

He introduced himself with pomp as a notary from Repentigny, come to Beauport to ensure that his daughter, newly wed to another notary, was well settled.

—*It is a grand family*, he concluded with the complacency of a man admiring his own success.

As we rumbled past the desolate heights of the Plains of Abraham, the conversation turned somber.

Red River

—*It was here, said a passenger in a low voice, that La Corriveau was hanged in 1763 — on the very highest point, to serve as a warning to all.*

And so the talk veered toward those blood-drenched years of 1759 and 1760, when French and English alike had watered these plains with their blood. I gazed out through the curtained window at the lonely stretches of field and sky, and glanced often to see if Malou still followed faithfully, his sturdy form weaving in and out of the dust stirred up by the wheels.

After little more than an hour, we reached *Sainte-Foy*, the first of many relays where fresh horses and hasty meals awaited us. The inn-keepers, whose livelihood depended on these fleeting travelers, bustled with anxious courtesy, and the coachman, stuffing the remains of his food into his cheeks like a squirrel preparing for winter, shouted :

—*For those with urgent needs, now's the time ! The becosses are at the bottom of the garden !*¹⁴

We were to pass through twenty-nine such stages before reaching Montréal — a slow and patient odyssey of 270 kilometers, crossing sixteen rivers by bridge or ferry.

The notary, who had developed a decided interest in me — an interest I found increasingly unwelcome — informed me with a certain pomp :

—*You know, Mademoiselle, this Chemin du Roy was Canada's first King's Highway ! Imagine, it connects the beating hearts of Québec, Trois-Rivières, and Montréal !*

He went on to proclaim his own importance :

¹⁴ Bécosse = backhouse or wc.

Red River

—*President of the Churchwardens of Our Lady of the Purification*, he said, pausing to let the majesty of the title sink in, *and we are enlarging the nave and rebuilding the façade !*

I nodded politely, murmuring words of admiration, though I longed to escape his gaze.

—*You give yourself unstintingly*, I said, wishing only that he would give less of his attention to me.

He accepted the compliment with a modest air, declaring :

—*I have received so much from my fellow men, it is only just that I give of myself in return.*

And so, through village after village — Saint-Augustin, Neuville, Les Écureuils, Cap-Santé, Deschambault — we journeyed onward, a motley band of strangers sharing the same carriage, the same dust, the same slow passage through the endless Canadian wilderness, where every stone and tree seemed heavy with the memory of battles lost and won, and of hopes forever abandoned along the way.



New France Livres. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 35

A Notary a Little Too Obliging

I always speak of Québec as the capital, and yet, when I passed through that venerable city in 1849, it had already lost that title. Once the indomitable heart of New France —this Québec, which the Bostonnais, in their trembling imagination, likened to an impregnable Troy, fearing the fierce courage of its sons who would not hesitate to assault them in the dead of winter— it was now but a memory of grandeur.

At the time of my wanderings, the capital of the United Provinces of Canada was Montréal ; but already, under the blows of the Orangemen's violence, the government was preparing to flee once more, this time toward the quieter shores of Toronto, then but a fledgling town.

—Politicians, mused the notary beside me, always prefer to dwell far from the tumultuous gaze of the people, whose righteous anger they secretly dread."

We trotted along the winding Chemin-Saint-Louis, which ran like a sinuous ribbon across the Plains of Abraham, once hallowed by blood and legend. From time to time, towering windmills, with their broad, slow-turning arms, saluted us solemnly against the grey sky.

—These windmills are grand, I said, but what of those massive, brooding towers ?

—Defense towers, he answered. Martello Towers, born of Corsican stone and English fear, raised here to repel the Americans' ambition.

Until then, I had known only the modest mill of Trois-Pistoles, whose faded image drifted somewhere in the misty fields of my memory, and the proud white sails of *Isle-aux-Coudres*, tirelessly caressing the eternal azure.

Red River

At the third relay, fortune allowed me to take a seat in the coupé. The coachman and the *postilion*, not to be outdone, performed a grand theatre of imprecations, seasoning the air with swearwords so colorful that the old ladies crossed themselves while the young ones giggled behind their handkerchiefs.

—*They seek to dazzle us, to scandalize or seduce*, I thought, lowering my gaze, lest I encourage their antics.

I, who thought I had heard everything among the lumberjacks and trappers of the Saguenay, was astounded at the city-folk's inexhaustible invention when it came to swearing, as though the devil himself inspired their tongues.

Each crack of the whip, each “*dia*” to the left and “*hue*” to the right, rang out with the vigor of a battle cry, urging our six spirited Canadian horses up hills steeped in dust and song.

After covering eight stages, I surrendered to weariness and let the coach continue its journey without me. At *La Pérade*, cradled by the *Sainte-Anne River*, I bade farewell to my traveling companions. Yet as soon as the old notary heard of my decision to rest, he too, miraculously, declared himself fatigued.

—*Can you accommodate me ?* I asked the relay master.

—*Only for you, Madame ? Of course!* he said with a jovial bow.

The innkeeper's wife led me upstairs to a cavernous room, its vast gloom broken only by the silhouettes of two immense beds and three little ones tucked against the walls. I chose the smallest and slid my bundle under a great bedframe carved with lion's paws. Supper awaited us

Red River

downstairs, for above the fireplace hung a rustic sign: *He who sleeps, dines.*¹⁵

—*Does it mean that one may get full just by sleeping ?* I asked innocently.

—*No such luck,* chuckled the notary. *It simply means that supper is mandatory if one desires lodging.*

The notary, whose gallantry was as ancient as his frock coat, insisted on paying for my meal: a savory *sagamité*, steaming and fragrant¹⁶, followed by a plate of pig's foot stew, as tender as memory itself. Malou, my faithful wolf-dog, feasted gloriously, devouring my leftovers before the innkeeper, charmed, bestowed even more upon him.

It struck me, not without a little secret amusement, that my fine lace dress and embroidered silk handkerchiefs, precious relics of Madame Légaré's generosity, granted me privileges I would never have enjoyed clad in rough trousers and homespun shirt. Was it a sin to relish these small advantages ? Perhaps — but one too sweet to resist.

Malou, after his orgy of bones and broth, was entrusted to the care of the stable boys.

—*Is he dangerous ?* a cowherd whispered, eyeing the wolfish beast.

—*Not unless you bother him,* I replied. *Treat him with indifference, and he will repay you with the same.*

After thanking the notary profusely for his kindness, I excused myself.

¹⁵ “Qui dort dine.”

¹⁶ La *sagamité* est un mets amérindien à base de maïs, de poisson ou de viande, assaisonné de baies, le tout cuit dans de la graisse.

Red River

—*It has been a long and wearying day, I said.*

—*Indeed, he replied with a heavy sigh, I, too, must seek rest.*

I climbed to the sleeping chamber, navigating its gloom with outstretched hands. But no sooner had I bumped into the immense central bed than a muffled, cranky voice rose from the darkness :

—*Careful, sti ! People are sleeping here ! Tabarouette ! No respect anymore !*

My eyes, adjusting to the night, discerned that nearly every bed was occupied by slumbering figures. I crept to my little bed and, still fully clothed for modesty, sank into its fragile embrace.

Across from me, the notary, stripped of his stiff garments, floated like a ghost in a white nightgown and cap — a ridiculous, spectral figure.

Midnight. A hand —cold, stealthy, insistent— slithered like a snake across my mattress. I opened my eyes wide. In the darkness, I perceived the grim truth : the notary's bed, like some perfidious ship, had drawn silently alongside mine. His hand, emboldened by silence, sought its prey. At first, I shifted away in disgust; still the hand pursued, groping with the slow audacity of the shameless.

Had he not boasted, at supper, of his "long arm"¹⁷ in the affairs of the Parish Council ? Little did I know he meant it quite so literally. At last, anger rising like a storm within me, I cried out in a voice that shook the rafters :

—Sir! You wake me up ! Kindly withdraw your hand !

¹⁷ "Avoir le bras long" means "having friends in high places; being capable of pulling strings.

Red River

The notary, abashed but not altogether repentant, muttered:

—*Forgive me... I didn't think you would notice.*

—*You jest, surely !* I retorted sharply.

Still he hovered, whispering :

—*Listen, Alexie... I like you very much...*

—*We shall speak tomorrow,* I cut him short, *if, indeed, there is anything to say. For now, begone !*

Before he could answer, a deep, furious voice from another bed thundered :

—*Enough whining ! If I get up, someone's gonna get hurt !*

Thus ended the notary's attempt at gallantry, crushed beneath the greater fear of a carter's wrath — and I, wrapping myself tighter in my dignity and my lace, surrendered myself once more in the arms of Morpheus, Greek god of dreams.

Cabanes de pêcheurs des poissons des chenaux, à La Pérade. Priv. Coll.



Red River

Chapter 36 **Return to Boyhood**

When I awoke at dawn, a pale and languid light filtering through the frosted windows, I found that the notary had departed on an earlier diligence, like a sinister bird fleeing the scene of his disgrace. His bed, once the stage of his ambiguous charity, had resumed the severe alignment of a soldier's cot, cold and unblemished, as if nothing had ever disturbed its sheets.

I would thus be spared the false effusions of that man's courtesy, behind which, I now knew, lurked the treachery of a more sordid desire.

As I smoothed my travel-worn clothes with feverish hands, I heard—clearer than if she had been standing beside me—the admonishing voice of my mother, lofty and pitiless in its judgment :

—It is your fault, Alexie. Never accept gifts from a man. Men's generosity is never without calculation. Nor, indeed, is that of women. If you intend—as I dare hope from my own daughter—to give nothing in return, then it is neither fair nor honest to accept what is offered.

Why, in every hour of self-reproach, must her voice rise in my mind like the voice of conscience itself ? It was as though she lived within me, a secret and invincible tribunal, ever vigilant, ever merciless. It maddened me !

Yet this bitter lesson would serve me faithfully throughout the uncertain course of my life. Hastily, I gathered my few belongings and descended for a hurried breakfast. Then, at the stroke of ten, I mounted the *coupé* of the stagecoach beside the coachman, under a sky as pure and immense as a revelation.

Red River

Two muskets rested behind him, grim talismans against the threat of bandits; for the large mail trunk we bore contained treasures that might cost them their lives to defend.

We crossed by ferry the shimmering ribbon of Rivière-Sainte-Anne, Malou leaping aboard with the joyful gravity that only animals possess. The countryside unfurled before us like an illuminated page : meadows ablaze with wildflowers, forests trembling under a warm wind, distant steeples sparkling under the midday sun.

At Trois-Rivières, we halted for an excellent meal. The city rose proudly on its promontory, a guardian eagle surveying the majestic River St. Lawrence below. At each parish, the coachman would descend to open the great trunk, retrieving packets of letters destined for scattered seigneuries or lonely presbyteries along the Chemin du Roy.

—*It is not like winter*, he told me. *When snow buries the land, the stage-coach alone braves the wilderness. In summer, the mailboat steals much of our burden.*

Two days later, at Repentigny, we passed by the church of Notre-Dame, half-clad in scaffolding as it reached skyward toward its unfinished dreams. Thus, the notary had not lied about that, at least. We embarked upon another ferry, gliding over the braided currents where the *Rivière-des-Prairies* and the *Rivière-des-Mille-Îles* surrendered themselves to the great *St. Lawrence*. Before us, immense and teeming, rose the massive island of Montréal.

The closer we came, the more the road thickened with traffic : wagons creaking under harvests, horses steaming in the heat, vendors hawking their wares, all converging toward the great city like rivers feeding a vast sea. We passed the parishes of *Pointe-aux-Trembles*, *Longue-Pointe*, *Saint-Laurent*... and at last, under a sky paled by the dust and noise of the throng, we beheld Montréal itself, grander and more tumultuous than Québec, boasting nearly sixty thousand souls.

Red River

How could I hope to find my way in this labyrinth, this living ocean of stone and flesh ? A silent prayer rose from my heart to the heavens — a desperate cry for guidance, so that I might not stumble into some fatal error. Ah ! If only my parents could see me now, braving such perils alone, what agony would seize their hearts !

At the inn, I sought refuge in a rented chamber. With swift, practiced motions, I donned my male attire once more : the rugged plaid shirt, the velvet trousers worn thin by travel, the leather belt that secured my trusted hatchet beneath my shirt and the dagger fastened close against my thigh. In a hidden pocket, I secreted a few piastres — from my fragile fortune. As for the delicate lace dress and double-crested hat, I folded them into my bundle without ceremony, heedless of the fine egret plumes that would surely be crushed. They belonged to another life — a life too perilous to sustain.

—And now, I whispered to Malou, who thumped his tail against the floor, we must find my uncle Ildefonse... and my beautiful Rémi. A needle in a haystack !

Outside, the stagecoach prepared to depart for New York, carrying with it a throng of emigrants —French Canadians, Irish, desperate souls in search of elusive fortunes in the factories of New England.

Behind them, the Protestant Yankees, fearing this papist tide, abandoned the Atlantic and sought new havens on the distant Pacific coast — fleeing their own phantoms, yet ever pursued by them. For men never escape their fears, especially when those fears are born of their own imaginations.

As I stepped onto the busy sidewalk, Malou bounded to my side, yelping with such rare, unrestrained joy that I could not help but laugh aloud. In his exuberance, I glimpsed our old companionship restored — master and dog, traveler and guardian, brothers under the indifferent sky.

Red River

—*Come, Malou !* I cried, my heart swelling with a fierce and reckless hope. *Here we are — in Montréal !*



Red River

Chapter 37 **Lost in Misery**

I had left behind, without a backward glance, the faithful diligence with its faded velvet walls — three long days of jostling torture that had bruised my back but not my resolve. Nothing could unseat the obstinate fire within me, that inner compass forever pointing toward Rémi, as if he were a celestial light beckoning me through the fog of misfortune.

And yet, as I stood at last upon the trembling edge of my destination, the joy that should have surged through my veins was absent, replaced instead by a cold emptiness. The journey was over — but the quest had only just begun.

Now, in this vast and pulsating anthill called Montréal, I was alone. The city spread before me not as a sanctuary, but as a labyrinth of stone and shadow, where souls vanished, and dreams were trampled underfoot like leaves in November.

Beneath my plaid shirt, I felt my stomach constrict — not with hunger, but with dread. The generous purse given me by Madame Légaré nestled heavily against my ribs, both a blessing and a burden. Money can open doors, yes — but it cannot show the way.

At my side, faithful Malou pressed close, his body taut, his gaze alert. Even he, in all his canine wisdom, seemed daunted by the great city's clamor. We were like castaways washed ashore in a foreign land.

Seeking guidance, I turned to three ladies who stood conversing on the pavement — dignified in bearing, their parasols catching the morning sun like banners of fragile grace. Summoning the last of my courage, I approached them with the humility of a pilgrim at the gate of a temple :

Red River

—Pardon me, mesdames... Would you happen to know of a modest hotel — one not too dear ?

The ladies, adorned with strange finery and large astonished eyes, turned toward me with the elegance of swans startled upon a darkened lake. One of them addressed me in a tongue that resembled neither French nor any dialect of our countryside — it rolled out of her lips like a velvet ribbon I could not grasp.

Bewildered, I attempted to repeat my question, which must have sounded like the croak of a rustic raven in that Babel of a city. But, without a word and with the perfect harmony of a choir long rehearsed, they turned their backs to me and glided away, their gowns rustling like reeds in the wind.

Thus, did I first encounter the formidable enigma of the English language.

A few paces further on, I saw another woman, whose revealing attire seemed to betray her profession more completely than a nun's habit would have done — so unfamiliar was I with the secret language of urban seduction. She stood on *Rue Saint-Paul*, framed by shadows and gaslight. I posed the same innocent question to her.

—*The Hôtel Rasco is very good if your purse is slim, my little lovebird*, she replied, her voice a melody of weary sweetness. *Go straight on, and you shall see it across from the Bonsecours Market. You can't miss it.*

—*Thank you, madame*, I murmured, as though speaking to a vision.

—*You're welcome, darling—and may God watch over you*, she added, with a wink that felt like a benediction or a curse.

I walked on, my boots echoing down the worn stone of Rue Saint-Paul, until I saw it : a rusted sign dangling like a scab above the door of a grand building that must once have dreamed of being noble :

Red River

Hôtel Rasco, the inscription declared, carved with pomp into the lintel, though the building's leprous façade belied such ambitions.

Its windows, broken and bandaged with cardboard, stared blankly down the street like the eyes of a madman in prayer.

I hesitated, then crossed the threshold. A stale darkness swallowed me. Behind a counter that seemed to have been erected during the last plague, a man sat like a wounded pirate, one eye fixed upon me while the other slumbered beneath a black patch.

—*Good morning, sir*, I said, with all the dignity I could muster. *Do you have a room that is not too costly ?*

—*That's all I have*, my little gentleman, he growled cheerfully. *How many souls ?*

—*Just mine.*

—*And for how long must I shelter this wandering soul of yours ?*

—*I do not know yet... I am searching for my uncle, Ildefonse de La Durantaye, and my cousin Rémi Bernier. Do you know them, perhaps ?*

—*Listen, my little starling*, he chuckled. *There are nearly sixty thousand souls adrift in Montréal — it is the largest city in North America...*

—*Yes, of course... That was foolish of me.*

—*Quite so*, he said, still laughing. *But since your folly is endearing, I'll give you the room for a week. A piasse and twenty-five. Paid in advance.*¹⁸

¹⁸ 'Piasse' = 'piastre'.

Red River

I handed over the coin, and he returned a few greasy pennies with the air of a banker performing a sacrament. Then, with the ceremony of an undertaker, he retrieved from a drawer a rusted iron key and a tallow candle, its wick frozen in a grotesque cascade of waxy tears. He led me through foul-smelling corridors where shadows clung to the walls like bruises.

As we passed, I caught sight of a child —his face streaked with grime and his hair clumped like straw left out in the rain— biting hungrily into a strip of peeling paint he had torn from the wall.

The wall, like him, was crumbling. His tiny mouth, rimmed with snot and despair, gnawed away at the flake as though it were manna.

Thus, did I take possession of my first lodging in Montréal, in a palace of ruin where even innocence tasted hunger from the plastered bones of the city.

Most of the doors along the shadowed corridor yawned half-open like the mouths of weary souls, breathing out a fetid air thick with the acrid perfume of urine, rotting refuse, and sour whiskey. The trembling flame of a half-spent candle bled its light through the gloom, revealing a dismal world of wreckage and despair.

Everywhere, the battered walls bore witness to ancient fury : holes gouged by fists or boots, scars of forgotten battles, bruises of time and neglect. Misery had etched itself into the very wood, into the mortar, into the silence between groans.

In the debris of those sordid chambers lay men, women, even children — spectral and ragged, their bodies half-clothed, sprawled across stained pallets like abandoned marionettes.

Some mumbled drunken refrains, their mouths twisted into grotesque smiles that mocked the melodies they tried to summon. Others, fevered and hollow-eyed, wailed with the slow agony of the dying.

Red River

From another room came the crash of fists and steel — curses hurled like stones from one soul to another, blasphemies fouling the already putrid air.

This was not a lodging-house. It was the *necropolis of the poor*. The underworld birthed by England's infernal machine —the *Industrial Revolution*— which had bound the colonies hand and foot and forbade them from rising in fair competition.

—*Yes, I know*, murmured the receptionist, his voice low, a little ashamed to have led me through so much human ruin. *It could be better. But, for the price of a single day, you receive all this... splendor for a week !*

—*Yes... of course*, I answered, though the words scraped in my throat.

—*Some*, he continued, *are workmen cast aside — victims of a machine that mangled their limbs. Others, the idle and the jobless, fell prey to tuberculosis, to typhus, to smallpox and the dreaded cholera brought by the starving Irish...*

—*Yes, I know...*

—*Their last refuge is laudanum.*

—*Lauda...?*

—*Laudanum*, he repeated. *Opium dissolved in spirits. A balm for the soul, brewed in India by the British East India Company. It peddles this poison across the Empire — and beyond.*

—*And... this is legal ?*

—*Legal ? No ! But tolerated. The Company's power is such that it need not ask permission. It owns the Parliament, buys the conscience of the*

Red River

State. Apothecaries sell this torment by the vial and line their pockets with the despair of the poor.

—It is dreadful ! And the Queen allows—?

—My dear sir, he interrupted with a bitter laugh, Her Majesty wages war on China itself to force that ancient and noble nation to swallow this opiate. She turns her gaze from Ireland's famine, lets her subjects rot in their own starvation. Don't speak to me of monarchy. The Republic alone harbors the flame of hope.

—And this hotel...?

—This hotel, he said, sighing as though unearthing a forgotten tomb, was once the envy of all Montréal. Inaugurated in 1836, it welcomed singers of renown, barons of fortune, moneylenders with crimson teeth. The cream of the bourgeoisie once swept through these very halls in silken coats and perfumed gloves. But time is cruel to all splendors. Newer palaces arose. The fashionable departed. Five years have passed now since we began letting rooms to the poor, as the rot crept in, like ivy on a tombstone.

He leaned closer, his tone now fatherly :

—Double-lock your door, son ! Some here are desperate, and desperation sharpens hunger into a knife. But you seem a good lad.

—I try to be, I replied humbly. I have a dog... may I keep him in the room ?

—Yes, but it'll cost you fifteen pennies more.

—Alrighty...

Red River

He led me to a small chamber and opened the door. The furnishings were meagre : a bed in a corner, its mattress sunken like a grave; a lone chair ; a rickety table whose broken leg was propped up by a crate. Upon it sat a chipped earthenware basin and a large jug, empty.

—There it is — your kingdom ! Room 222. Easy to remember. I'll bring you bedsheets and fill the jug with drinking water. One set of sheets per week. The chamber pot room is yonder, but I'll place one under your bed just in case. When it fills, you may empty it into one of the other pots down the hall.

He paused, his eyes catching the guttering flame of the candle.

—And now, sleep, if you can. You are among the forgotten.

Hôtel Rasco, Montréal, XIX Century. Priv.Coll.



Chapter 38

A Hotel Full of Scoundrels and Vermin

The hotel into which fate had thrown me was a cavern of squalor, a foul refuge for scoundrels, vermin, and the wreckage of humanity. I ushered in my faithful Malou, who, far from being repelled, sniffed this cesspool with the lively curiosity of a wolf entering a battlefield strewn with corpses.

After an attentive inspection, in which he catalogued a thousand unspeakable odors — the mingled scents of misery, rot, and old sins — he retired philosophically to a corner less infested than the rest.

When evening fell, hunger drove me back into the streets to procure a little bread and cheese at a dilapidated grocery store. The neighborhood, the oldest and most corroded in the city, exhaled the breath of forgotten centuries.

Returning with Malou by my side, I crossed the shadowy corridors of the hotel, whose open doors, lit only by the trembling halo of my tallow candle, revealed to me a purgatory of living phantoms. Pale and hollowed faces emerged from the darkness; eyes heavy with despair clung to my fleeting shadow.

—*Hey! You! Come here, will you ?* a voice cracked like dry wood behind me.

I quickened my step, unwilling to be snared by these lamentations. Against the grimy walls, a few gas jets hissed fitfully, casting monstrous shadows that made poverty itself appear grotesque, a thing more repulsive and frightful than I had ever imagined.

—*Spare a coin, lad !* groaned a figure crouched in the corner. *I need laudanum! I'm sick — sick to death !*

Red River

That night, I waged a hopeless war against the lice and bedbugs that shared my bed. Sleep eluded me ; fear gnawed at my heart more savagely than the insects at my flesh.

Though my purse was still heavy enough to shield me for a time, I shuddered to think that youth and health — my only true possessions — were as fleeting as the roses that bloomed but for a day.

Yet above all, my resolve remained fixed: I must find Rémi and the family he had promised me in my dreams.

The days slipped by, and through whispered confidence, I learned that most of my fellow castaways in this shipwreck of a hotel were refugees from the countryside, driven to the city by the unyielding cruelty of overburdened farms.

One evening, as I climbed the creaking staircase, a child's plaintive voice called out :

—*Hey ! Hey !*

I turned and saw a small boy, fair-haired, with great blue eyes sunken into his pale face. He struggled to form his words in French :

—*Dia diout!... My... mom... mourir !*

I retraced my steps in alarm.

—*Your mother ? She has died ?*

He nodded. His tiny hand tugged me into a stinking, airless room. My foot struck a box; at once, four monstrous cockroaches fled into the yawning cracks of the floorboards. The room was a mausoleum of decay : scraps of fabric strewn across the floor, the air thick with the smell of mildew and death.

Red River

Under a heap of rags, the mother's body lay stretched, her face frozen into a mask of suffering, her wide blue eyes still open to a heaven that had long ago abandoned her. I touched her forehead — it was colder than marble; her hands were stiffened into claws.

The child clutched at my sleeve, whispering through sobs :

—Maman... used to stroke my hair... kiss me... to make me feel brave... but today... she asked for nothing. I thought she was sleeping... She was so cold... I covered her with all we had... to warm her... but she stayed cold... Then I knew... she was dead... I tried to tell the man downstairs... but he would not listen...”

Tears stung my eyes as I kissed the child's forehead. I could not, I would not, leave him alone beside that silent ruin of love.

I carried him to my narrow bed, where he fell asleep against my shoulder, breathing in short, shuddering sighs. I watched over him until dawn.

At first light, a rickety cart came for the dead — a ghastly chariot that collected corpses as one gathers broken branches after a storm. Three layers of bodies already rotted under a thin covering of tarpaulin. When they took the child's mother away, he broke into a wail so heartbreaking that even the indifferent haulers lowered their eyes.

Later that same day, I learned of a charity on Rue Saint-Nicolas —La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul— a place where forsaken children were received without question, fed by the alms of good souls.

—*You know*, said the one-eyed concierge with a sneer, *children born of sin have little worth. Bastards, they call them. Hidden children, hidden shame. But those fellows at Saint-Vincent take them all — no questions, no judgment. Unlike some sects, who only help their own breed of sinners.*

Red River

—*Such cruelty, I said, from people who call themselves Christians !*

—*Aye, he muttered. You'll find no greater cruelty than among the righteous.*

I knew that this was how sinners found excuses for being selfish... by slandering the righteous.

I clasped the child's small hand in mine.

—*I'll take you there, little one, I whispered. You shall not be forgotten.*

And that very afternoon, with all the resolve in my heart, I set out toward Rue Saint-Nicolas, bearing the child like a pilgrim bears a sacred burden.



Homelessness in Montréal. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 39

A Brave but Not Foolhardy Customer

The search for my cousin Rémi —and for a shred of livelihood— led me to wander tirelessly through the labyrinthine streets of Montréal, where wonders sprang up at every turn, like mirages in the desert. Not a week passed without some new spectacle unfurling before my dazzled eyes.

One day, a violinist, his hat laid humbly at his feet, scraped out on his trembling strings a melancholy air that rose to the heavens like a prayer.

—*Come, let us pause a moment !* I said to myself, enraptured by the broken cadences.

Further along, the sharp screech of a barrel organ tore through the crowd ; the organ-grinder, his face smeared with dust and fatigue, shouted over the din :

—*Step right up, ladies and gentlemen ! The songs of the Tout-Paris, brought to your very ears !*

The music rose, vulgar and merry, in a chaos of voices and bells. On a certain Sunday afternoon, a tightrope walker danced high above Rue-Saint-Paul, his silhouette swaying perilously against the white clouds, while, on the ground, his acolytes passed among the gaping spectators, rattling their tin cups :

—*A penny, a piastre — whatever you can give ! This man dines neither on love nor on water !*

Red River

In this living theatre of misery and courage, a ragged urchin, daring to beg without permission, was shaken by the collar and cast out like a stray dog. Another day, a puppeteer set up his little stage on the sidewalk, and while the wooden Guignol beat the gendarme into submission, pickpockets slipped their hands into the wallets of the enchanted onlookers.

Newsboys flitted like sparrows between the legs of the crowd, shrilling :

— *Le Monde ! Fresh news ! The Gazette ! The Montréal Gazette !*

Vendors of all sorts roamed the city — ragpickers with their carts groaning under the weight of rags, commissionaires on horseback galloping from house to house.

One afternoon, I saw a giant of a lad lurching by with a potato-masher strapped to his stump of a leg, running until he collapsed in laughter and jeers.

— *Ah, one must work hard to survive in this world !*

Thanks to my boyish costume, I had found employment as a waiter at a tavern on *Place d'Armes*. I had been there scarcely a month when Fate, ever inventive, cast before me a curious and dangerous trial.

One evening of squalling rain, a man entered — a man whose broad shoulders strained the seams of his threadbare jacket. A savage scar ran from his temple to the corner of his mouth, as if the mark of Cain had been carved into his flesh by a cutlass on some forgotten wharf. His nose, broken and battered, told of a life not given only to returning blows, but also to receiving them in kind.

We waiters, connoisseurs of human vice, could tell at a glance who would tip generously and who would leave us nothing but insults.

Red River

Some men drank themselves into laughter; others into rage. This one, I saw at once, would drink himself into a sullen, brutish fury.

—*Tabarouette ! I muttered. God spare me from having him at my table !*

But the heavens did not hear my prayer.

A few weeks later, the brute fixed his eyes on me, raised his gnarled hand —four fingers, one of them grotesquely truncated— and summoned me. I hastened to serve him four beers without delay. They vanished into his throat like stones hurled into a well.

Every half-hour he stumbled to the adjoining chamber-pot room to make space for more drink. As I set his third round before him, I felt the weight of his gaze, scrutinizing me insolently, measuring my arms, my legs, my very shoulders. He then looked at his own massive arms, and with a hoarse laugh, muttered under his breath :

—*Hey ! You, you're a real lumberjack, huh ! Ah ! Ah ! Ah !*

—*No sir, I answered, wary. I'm only a beer waiter.*

—*Me, I thought you were a tree feller, with your big arms and creature legs !*

His words were less offensive than the sneering tone that carried them. Strength of arm — that pitiful idol of fools ! Yet the real insult was not in what he said, but in how he said it : with contempt, with malice, with the drunkard's hunger for domination.

The more I bore it patiently, the more he swelled with pride and thirst for humiliation. He was like a boy tormenting a caged bird, enraged not by its weakness, but by its dignified silence.

Red River

—*Come on, you little fift*¹⁹, he spat. *I'm gonna knock you down, you creature !*

Seeing that I could neither outfight him nor flee, I turned to the ancient weapons of the weak : intelligence and audacity. Raising my voice so that every customer could hear, I cried :

—*What have I done to you, sir ? I am only serving you your beers ! Why this hatred ?*

The tavern fell silent. Even the drunken clatter stilled. The brute blinked, disoriented by my defiance. Then he barked again :

—*Shut your dirty mouth, you little fift !*

Feigning outrage, I shouted louder still :

—*If you want to prove your strength, why don't you try it on Jérôme Sanschagrin ?*

Now, Jérôme Sanschagrin was a mountain of a man, seated in the corner with his beer in hand, gentle as a lamb — as true strength always is. I clapped him on the shoulder, rousing him from his reverie.

—*There's a man here, I said, who wants to challenge you. Who wants to bet five piastres on Jérôme ?*

Hands shot up in the smoky room, coins clinked on the tables.

The would-be bully paled. His lip trembled. His bravado, inflated with cheap beer, deflated like a punctured balloon.

¹⁹ Fift : nickname for effeminate men.

Red River

At last, with a guttural curse, he lowered his head, fumbling for his battered purse. I took his crumpled two-dollar bill, made change, and watched him slink toward the double doors that protected the outside world from such pitiful spectacles.

As he vanished, I called after him with feigned cheer :

—Thank you for the five cents you paid each of the twenty men who bet against you !

Laughter roared through the tavern like a sudden squall.

—Two free beers for everyone ! I shouted, and the crowd, drunk already, drank again in merriment.

He never dared show his face there again.

That night, as I returned home, Malou, my faithful gray wolf, trotted silently at my side. I looked down at him and smiled. It is good, sometimes, to be small, but clever.



**Place d'Armes, Montréal, around
the end of the XIX Century.
Priv.Coll.**

Chapter 40
The Duel of the Axe

On another evening fraught with beer fumes and rancor, a sullen customer, drunk on pride as much as on drink, dared to challenge the tally of his consumption.

I know well that some tavern-keepers, pirates of the cellar, have quick fingers when counting the glasses drained by men whose minds are already adrift on the tides of intoxication. But here, it was not I who was the thief. Sixteen glasses had been poured; sixteen must be paid.

—*Do what you can*, the bartender warned me curtly, *but you've taken sixteen bottles from me, and you'll pay for every last one.*

I resolved not to yield. Injustice, like a nettle to bare skin, has always roused my blood. I stood firm, and the customer, failing to sway me with bluster, turned to insults, expecting cowardice to follow outrage. He knew not the silent sentinel who lay at my feet : Malou, feigning sleep behind the counter, yet attentive to every modulation of my voice.

It was I who, against all expectation, provoked him :

—You have insulted me. I demand satisfaction.

He sneered:

—What is this little fool braying about ?

—*You have insulted me*, I repeated solemnly, *and by the ancient rights of honor, I claim the choice of arms. We shall fight — with axes.*

Red River

As I spoke, I drew my small hatchet from its hiding place in a rag, and a tremor ran through the assembled drinkers. A hush fell, broken only by a few nervous exclamations. Some took me for a madman; others, for a posturing fool about to be crushed by a real brawler.

Yet all, without exception, thrilled at the prospect of a spectacle — for the boredom of their wretched lives cried out for blood, for drama, for anything that could make them forget themselves.

For my part, I knew too well that dueling was forbidden, and that death, whether mine or his, would lead one way or another to the gallows. My father, solemn as a priest of doom, had once told me how, in the days of New France, duelists were not hanged immediately, but first strangled — as if to doubly avenge the law's affront.

Yet I would not draw back. Death did not frighten me as much as the thought of injustice prevailing.

The customer, misled by my wiry frame and the thinness of my limbs —limbs no longer hardened by rowing or wood-chopping—laughed and accepted my challenge. Honor demanded no less. A refusal would have been a mark of infamy.

He asked only for a weapon.

The tavern-keeper and the drinkers, now truly believing, pushed back the heavy tables to clear a makeshift arena. A ring of expectant faces formed, mouths half-open, eyes wide with the intoxication of fear and delight.

—Before we engage in mortal combat, I said, let us have a shooting match. That way, you shall know the man you have chosen to fight.

A shadow passed over his features. Doubt had entered his heart, as a worm enters ripe fruit. I handed him my axe, its weight familiar to my hands but foreign to his. He took it with a wary glance, and for a

Red River

terrible moment, I saw the thought cross his mind : he could murder me then and there, before any contest began.

The breath of the tavern held still. I had made a grievous error : I had armed my enemy.

Several men, sensing the danger, surreptitiously drew pistols from their belts. The tavern-keeper cried out :

—Crisse, Jean-Paul Prudhomme ! Don't you dare ! You'd be riddled with bullets before Alexis even hit the floor !

Caught between temptation and terror, Jean-Paul grunted and set his tall hat upon a nearby table. Fear of instant retribution is often the last bastion of a scoundrel's reason.

He took careful aim. His brows furrowed. The axe flew — a brutal, clumsy arc — and struck the doorframe with a bone-jarring crash before clattering to the floor like a fallen thunderbolt.

I picked up the weapon. Calmly, I measured the distance with my eye, took my stance, raised my arm... and hurled.

The hatchet sang through the air like a viper — and struck, with a shuddering blow, dead center into the oak door.

A stunned silence fell. For a heartbeat, no one moved, no one spoke. Then — a roar ! Applause ! Cheers ! The tavern exploded with shouts of "*Bravo !*"

—Jean-Paul Prudhomme, cried the tavern-keeper, his voice cutting through the tumult like a blade, *had that been your head, you'd already be roasting in hell ! Say your prayers, or apologize !*

Red River

Faced with death, the braggart found his courage shriveled to nothing. Without a word, he counted out the coins for his sixteen glasses, threw them onto the counter, and vanished into the night, a man disgraced.

—*Alexis*, muttered the tavern-keeper, shaking his head, *at this rate, you'll ruin me. Next time, collect the money as soon as the drinks are served. It'll save us all trouble.*

From that night forward, no man dared look down on me. Even those who had once regarded my slight frame with mocking pity now called me friend. My victories, written not in ink but in fear and admiration, earned me a fragile peace.

I also swore never again to come to work without Malou at my side. I made him a silent guardian, lying in wait behind the counter.

And so it was that one day, when a ruffian entered the tavern and, with a pistol, demanded the strongbox, Malou leapt at my signal, seizing the man's arm with the ferocity of a lion, and hurled him to the ground. In the chaos that followed, the thief was arrested — and the legend of Alexis and his faithful Malou grew all the greater in the songs and whispers of the town.



Chapter 41
The Messenger of Paradise

The feat that Malou had accomplished consecrated him henceforth as a living legend. In the little kingdom of the Place-d'Armes, where the stones themselves seemed to murmur our names, we became a kind of familiar marvel, half real, half miraculous.

Other tavern-keepers, coveting such prodigies under their roofs, whispered tempting offers to me in the smoky alleys. To hold us captive, my employer was forced to double my weekly wage, adding two hearty meals and a modest stipend for the vigilant slumbers of my gray wolf.

—*Malou, you are a most fortunate creature, I would often tell him, for you work while dreaming, and earn your keep while you doze.*

Yet my daily toil did not distract me from my other two missions : seeking out my beloved Rémi, and tending to the wrecked souls adrift in the Rasco Hotel. I would wander from parish to parish, like a pilgrim of old, imploring the priests and vicars to search their registers for a trace, a glimmer, of a Rémi Bernier or an Ildefonse de Ladurantaye.

Each time, a kind but sorrowful shake of the head answered my prayer:

—*Forgive me, young man. They are not here.*

Meanwhile, the hotel's beggars and cripples, those ruins of humanity, I quietly reported to the charitable societies. For in that harsh winter of the soul, there was no government hand to feed the poor — only the fragile hands of private charity reaching out in trembling compassion.

Red River

One day, the secretary of the *Société-Saint-Vincent-de-Paul* confided that his director, Monsieur Legentil, was planning a great annual collection, a *Winter Guignolée*, to fend off hunger during the Christmas season.

— *It would be wiser, I said impulsively, to beg only in the rich neighborhoods.*

Monsieur Legentil smiled with the slow melancholy of a man who knows the world's hidden truths.

— *Alas, dear child, it is among the poor that one finds the greatest generosity. I learned this bitter lesson in Paris.*

I pledged my help. His speech, clouded by the thick accent of his native country, required the secretary's kind translation. But soon, I learned to recognize the colors of every tongue: Gaspé, Québec, Acadia, the Eastern Townships, Marseille, Paris — each a music of its own, singing the exile of hearts.

It was during one such chilly autumn evening, when the wind scattered the yellowed leaves across the muddy streets like golden regrets, that my boss, Jules Gaudreault, came to me with somber news. His brother Alphonse, after battling the slow corruption of his body for a long time, was dying. A vigil of prayers and farewells was to be held at his bedside. I went with him, drawn by a secret sympathy for this man whose rough kindness I had learned to esteem.

Alphonse lived in a forgotten quarter of Montréal, where unpaved streets clung to the earth like scars, and wooden houses stood naked against the sky — raw monuments to a vanished age. The city, after the great fire of 1852, had forbidden such fragile dwellings, but here they lingered, stubborn and sorrowful.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted with a modest meal — bread, fèves-au-lard, and the weary smiles of those who had traveled far : from

Red River

Bytown, from Trois-Rivières, from nameless hamlets swallowed by the forest.

In a dim, smoky room, divided by a heavy velvet curtain, Alphonse lay dying. Behind that dark veil, the plague of tuberculosis consumed him, but still he clung to his earthly duties like a soldier at his post. Death, capricious and caparisoned like a courtier, waited politely in the shadows for the end of the last audience.

One by one, the mourners approached the veil to whisper their earthly messages, as though Alphonse were already halfway through the Gates of Paradise, a messenger of the living to the dead.

I, seated humbly by the door, heard each faltering voice :

— *Bonjour, Alphonse Gaudreault. It's me, Jean-Pierre Duval... I hear you're leaving us soon...*

— *Yes, my dear Jean-Pierre... I am to depart at dawn... Do you have messages for those beyond ?*

— *Tell my poor Symphorienne that the children are strong... the sow Lucie bore a fine litter... but the dairy cow yields little milk... Perhaps she might, by her prayers, entreat the Lord to heal our cow...*

— *I shall tell her... Fear not. And I shall ask if she might also find you work in the forest this winter...*

— *God bless you, Alphonse !*

Thus, they all entrusted him with their tender hopes, their desperate errands : to find a lost object, to heal a stricken child, to forgive a broken heart, to punish an enemy, or simply to deliver a kiss to a mother waiting beyond the veil of life.

Red River

The scene, so simple yet so immense in its human frailty, carved itself into my memory with the sharpness of a scar.

In the gray hours before dawn, while the mist still clung to the fields, Alphonse exhaled his last breath — a soul so burdened with the errands of the living that one wondered how he could ascend at all, laden with the thousand whispered hopes of the poor.

Dame Death, that patient old seamstress, smiled from her corner. She knew, as she always does, that no one escapes her weaving. If one struggles free today, tomorrow the thread will catch them again. She has eternity to ply her loom.



Red River

Chapter 42 **Aggression**

Anxious to bring some solace to the pale wretches of the Hôtel Rasco, where the wasting hand of phthisis sowed death in every bed, I often made my way to the modest quarters of the *Société Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, tucked away on Rue Saint-Nicolas.

There, noble souls bent over the misfortunes of abandoned children, as tenderly as they once had for the little Irish girl, whose mother had perished from hunger and despair.

—*We shall never replace your dear mother*, said the director, pressing the tiny hand between his own rough palms, *but here, you shall have three fathers and five mothers to love you.*

In those days, medicine was but a crude and bloody art. Surgeons, knowing little more than their patients, amputated arms and legs with all the indifference of butchers ; they ripped open chests and bellies with unwashed hands ; they wrenched teeth from aching mouths with blacksmith's pincers, charging fifteen pennies for one, twenty-five for two, as if pain itself had a discounted price. Into throats raw with disease, they shoved pills as bitter as gall, and as fetid as the dung of beasts.

Everything, even death, came at a cost. So dearly priced was life that the poor women of the Hôtel Rasco and the myriad "*courts of miracles*" of Montréal gave birth alone, unaided by the hand of a midwife, who demanded a piastre and fifty cents — a fortune unattainable to souls who counted their pennies one by one. Even the "thirty-sous" coin, that modest quarter-dollar, was too steep a ransom for a brief home visit.

Thus, it was that poverty and misfortune, like ravenous wolves, prowled through our alleys, hunting the weak and the slow, while the

Red River

colonial government, blind and cruel, forbade the rise of manufacturing that could have fed and clothed us, driving our people into exile as vagabonds in foreign lands.

My life in Montréal unfolded under a banner of perpetual surprise and danger. It was not rare that one of our tavern maids would come to me, her eyes clouded with apprehension, and murmur :

—*Would you mind, Alexis, walking me home ?*

—*With pleasure, Élodie*, I would answer, taking up my axe and calling to Malou, my faithful wolfhound.

I had long suspected that some of these invitations carried a sweeter intent than mere fear, for it was not common in those days for a young woman to boldly invite a young man to her door.

Still, I remained cloaked in the anonymity of my boy's attire, which preserved both my livelihood and my secret, even as the role weighed heavier with every passing day.

Often, my nocturnal expeditions — whether returning from work or launching yet another hopeless search for my lost cousin Rémi — led me through the labyrinthine darkness of poorly lit streets and alleys. Montréal, swollen with thousands of poor souls cast adrift from the barren countryside, was a city on the brink of despair.

Work was a mirage ; starvation a certainty. The night belonged to cutthroats and prowlers, and my every journey was a dance with shadows.

Streetlamps, few and far between, barely pierced the darkness. Though I had learned the art of defense — with knife, axe, and occasionally the grim snarl of Malou — I never sought combat. A dagger, slipped deftly between ribs, ends all bravery in an instant. And in those grim

Red River

times, the sawbones who called themselves doctors cured the sick only by speeding them to the grave.

—*My dear lad, my tavern master would jest, these quacks heal by sending their patients straight to paradise, where diseases trouble them no more !*

One night, having left Malou behind to guard the tavern, I was threading my way through a silent alley, wary and alert, when from the gloom a figure sprang, an arm coiled about my neck, and a blade pressed against my throat :

—*Your money, damn you ! Or you're a dead man !* the brigand hissed, his voice quivering with the terror of inexperience.

—*I have but twenty shillings,* I stammered, feigning terror, *to buy bread for my children...*

I had long rehearsed such a scene in the theater of my mind. I knew that in fear, hesitation could be a weapon. As he slackened his vigilance for the fatal moment of theft, I reached toward my pocket as though for my purse — but my fingers closed around the handle of my hidden axe.

With a sudden lunge, I delivered a savage kick to his groin, hearing his breath leave him in a broken gasp.

—*Oh, sir ! How clumsy of me !* I exclaimed with mock contrition. *I hope I haven't caused you too much discomfort !*

Even as the words danced from my lips, I brought the flat of my axe down hard upon his skull. He crumpled like a broken marionette onto the dirt, unconscious. I dragged his limp form onto the sidewalk, lest some passing cart grind him under its wheels. Then, after a final murmured benediction :

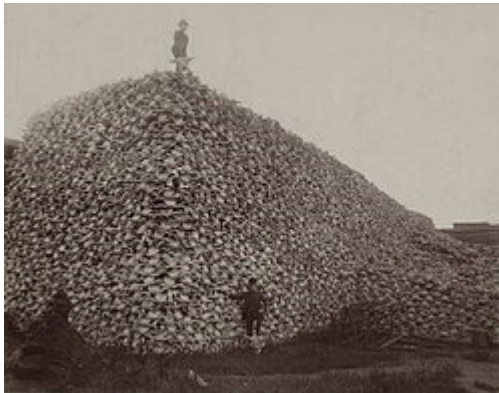
Red River

—Next time, little man, choose your victim more wisely.

Then, I slipped away into the night.

Intelligent courage, I have learned, lies less in reckless confrontation than in artfully avoiding it — though, when necessity calls, one must strike with swift and decisive hand. In a time when economic ruin had sowed hunger as a farmer sows wheat, petty thieves sprang up like thistles in the field. Poverty breeds pickpockets, as surely as love begets children and poets. The wealthy, on the other hand, prefer to steal in times of prosperity, when the harvest is rich and justice is blind.

Sometimes, wandering the streets, I would pause before one of the proud new draisines — the strange two-wheeled bicycles — which had begun to glide like strange insects through the wide boulevards of the city. I dreamed, foolishly, of mounting one and escaping the filth and danger of the streets. But dreams were luxuries far beyond my meager purse.



1892: bison bones collected by Indians and Métis across the Canadian-American Prairie and destined for processing at Michigan Carbon Works in Rougeville (a suburb of Detroit). Bones were processed to be used for fertilizer. In the 16th century, North America contained 30-40 million buffalo. The Canadian city of Regina (Saskatchewan) used to be called Pile d'Os [Pile-of-Bones].

Red River

Chapter 43

Ghosts

It was during one of those nights—black and brittle with frost—in the fabled winter of 1849–50 that, accompanied by my faithful Malou, I escorted home Jocelyne Ducharme, a humble cleaning lady of the tavern. I had vainly knocked at the doors of two Conseils de Fabrique, imploring them to tell me if, among their silent registries, they sheltered the name of a certain Rémi Bernier. My search had yielded nothing but cold looks and colder silences.

We were making our slow return along Rue-Saint-Pierre, nearing the intersection with Rue-Saint-Jacques, close by the grim Bastion-de-la-Paroisse, when, glancing absent-mindedly over the crumbling cemetery wall, my gaze fell upon a sight that froze the blood in my veins.

There, beneath a full moon that poured its pitiless light over the dead and the living alike, two white figures moved with feverish urgency among the tombs. One agitated itself wildly above a grave, while the other seemed to burrow into the frozen earth like a grave-robber from some infernal drama.

Though I have never been one to surrender foolishly to the old terrors of specters and night-demons, the spectacle that now unfurled before my eyes stirred ancient fears within me. One of these beings was shaking its white sheet with frenzied, almost gleeful violence, as if to terrify any mortal bold enough to pass too close.

—Perhaps the souls of the Afterworld, I mused, quickening my pace, grow bored with their endless exile and come back to tease us poor humans, out of idleness or spite. I cannot blame them: idleness is ever the mother of mischief.

Red River

Strengthened by the steady presence of my gray wolf at my side, and yet possessed by a morbid curiosity, I allowed myself to believe — or to hope — that perhaps even Camarde²⁰ herself might appear, eager to play her part in this *danse macabre*.

—*What devilry is this ?* I murmured.

Silently, I slid into the embrace of a thick bush that crowned the edge of the wall. Less than fifteen meters away, by the glistening headstones, the two "ghosts," their figures draped in traditional shrouds, were busy —horror of horrors— extracting a corpse from its resting place.

—*What nightmare is this ?* I thought, rubbing my eyes in disbelief with one hand while the other clutched poor Malou's scruff to stifle his rising growl.

And then — as though the nightmare wished to complete itself — one of the phantoms spoke in a low, exasperated voice :

—*Well, are you going to help me, or do you plan on whining all night ?*

—*I'm doing what I can ! Damned if I can go faster with this cursed ingrown toenail !* retorted the other, in tones as surly as they were human.

I blinked in astonishment. Was it possible for a ghost —a disembodied shadow— to suffer from such a terrestrial ailment as an ingrown toenail ? But then again, what laws govern the realm of the shades ?

—*This one's for you, and the next one's mine,* declared the first.

—*Good God, I thought, have I stumbled upon some sordid commerce between Heaven and Hell ?*

²⁰ Camarde = Death.

Red River

—*Sapregué! Hurry up, Pierrot, muttered the second. She's decked out like a princess of ancient Egypt !*

—*Torrieu ! laughed the leader. She would have been mightily surprised to know her grave would open like Pharaoh's tomb !*

—*Well then, strip her bare !*

At this final blasphemy, my soul recoiled. Without waiting for more, I fled, possessed by a panic so profound that even Malou struggled to match my mad flight. Never before had I run with such abandon, as though pursued by the hounds of hell.

The next morning, still shaken, I confided the grim vision to my employer, the tavern-keeper, expecting mockery or pity for what he would surely dismiss as the fever-dream of a fanciful mind. Instead, he nodded gravely, as one who has seen too much to be surprised.

—*Ah yes, he said, lowering his voice, they are medical students. They steal the newly buried to sell the bodies for dissection practice. It's how they pay for their studies.*

—*What ? I gasped, Is such sacrilege permitted ?*

—*Tolerated, rather, he replied. By law, the theft of a body, without the theft of its jewels or clothes, is punished only by a fine of twenty-five to fifty cents.*

—*Twenty-five cents! Is that all ?*

—*Yes! But if they steal so much as a sock or an earring, then they risk long years in prison. That is why they strip the bodies of all they wear, leaving nothing but nakedness behind.*

—*And the disguises ?*

Red River

—To frighten away curious souls like yourself, he smiled grimly. It is a custom, not only here in Montréal but across all of North America and Europe. In London, it is worse still — there are whispers of murder done in the dark, just to supply the insatiable hunger of the surgeons' tables.

Thus did the cold winter night teach me that in this world — and perhaps in the next — there are far worse things than ghosts.



Cimetière

Jocelyne Ducharme

— *Alexis, would you come for a walk with me on Sunday afternoon ?*

How could I have refused Jocelyne Ducharme ? With her, I loved to wander the old streets of Montréal, where the vanished fortifications left only the memory of ramparts and bastions, but where the stones still murmured the dreams and griefs of a bygone age.

Jocelyne was a rare soul : kind-hearted, learned, touched with that gentle melancholy of those who read the past as others read a prayer book. I held her in great esteem and admired the delicate light of knowledge that shone in her gaze. Yet I hid from her the fragile secret of my life, fearing to embroil her innocent affection in my perilous masquerade.

She often took my hand in hers, as one might seize a talisman against loneliness, and I let her, touched and pained by her tenderness. I would sometimes smile at her with a sad mirth that escaped my control, wondering what storm would shake her heart if she ever guessed that the Alexis she cherished wore a woman's soul beneath a boy's jacket.

—*Jocelyne, you are a treasure. And if I were truly the man destined for you, you would be the one I would choose*, I once said, reckless as a child playing at the edge of a precipice.

She turned to me then, her brown eyes clouded with anxious wonder.

— *Why do you say that, Alexis? You speak as one who hides a sorrow.*

— *Perhaps I do.*

Red River

— *Is it... that you would rather love men ?* she asked in a whisper.

I laughed softly, not in mockery but in pity for the entanglement of our hearts.

— *All I know, dear Jocelyne, is that no woman could ever bear my child.*

A shadow passed over her face, tender and grave.

— *It is sad... for I long for children.*

— *Then take good care of your heart, my friend,* I warned her. *Bind it to another, lest it break when it touches mine.*

— *You are strange, Alexis,* she said simply, and squeezed my hand with a compassion that almost undid me.

She was so good, so luminous, that I trembled to think I might one day darken her spirit. Jocelyne would often lead me out into the villages scattered across Montréal Island, where I knocked at every *Conseil de Fabrique*, asking for news of Rémi Bernier or Ildefonse de La Durantaye.

Three times, hope kindled like a torch in my chest — only to be cruelly extinguished by a misnamed stranger. Each deception hollowed me a little more, as if life were chiseling my heart into a vessel for despair.

Yet amidst these vain quests, Jocelyne offered me the gift of beauty. She showed me the new *Notre-Dame Cathedral* facing Place d'Armes, a stone hymn to Heaven, whose twin towers seemed to lift prayers into the icy sky.

— *It was completed just twenty years ago,* she said. *Built in the image of Notre-Dame de Paris.*

Red River

—*It seems so new*, I murmured, marvelling at the untouched majesty of its arches.

—*In all the Americas, only one church is greater in size.*

One evening, our wanderings led us past the blackened skeleton of a building. A surge of youth flooded the street, their sticks raised, their tricolor flags —green, white, and red ; blue, white, and red— whipping the air like living flames. The Marseillaise and the song of the Patriots of 1837 burst forth from their throats like battle cries.

Jocelyne sighed, and the sound seemed to carry all the sorrows of a vanquished people.

—*Why do you sigh, Jocelyne ?* I asked.

—*These are the Sons of Freedom*, she replied. *They rise so that the English-speaking minority will one day respect the soul of our land.*

I looked at the charred ruins with new eyes.

— *And this building?*

— *It was the Government House—the Marché Sainte-Anne. Orangist fanatics set it ablaze to stamp out our hopes. But in the ashes, liberty's seeds are sown.*

The wind howled like a bereaved mother through the ruins, and we walked on, chilled by more than the coming snow.

The cold of that winter gnawed even at the soul. Though I was grateful for the crude shelter of the tavern, it could hardly compare to the miserable frost that plagued the Hôtel Rasco, where some nights the mercury fell to a shivering 7 or 8 degrees.

Red River

The Saint-Vincent de Paul Conference worked miracles of charity, bringing hot soup to the Irish refugees and the poorest among us.

One bitter evening, I watched with rage as the hotel manager cast into the street an Irish family who could no longer pay their rent. I could not bear such cruelty: I brought them into my own small room, meaning to shelter them for a few days.

But winter has a way of stretching time into endless hardship, and they stayed on, until my own refuge was no longer my own.

I shared my bed with the mother, a woman who, for all her destitution, hesitated to rest beside the man she thought me to be. Little by little, I gained trust; and rightly so. The four children, brave little creatures, nested on the splintered floorboards, and told me in broken French of their ordeal : how the Anglo-Protestant landlords in Ireland had set fire to their home to drive them out, and how they had lived four long months in ditches and fields before crossing the sea.

— *Your floor, they said, is warmer than the wet grass, softer than the stones of our old paths. Believe us, Alexis !*

Thus fleas, bedbugs, lice, and sorrow themselves became our nightly companions. Yet for all the misery, there was in that crowded little room a stubborn flicker of human dignity, refusing to be snuffed out by winter or injustice.



My dear friend Jocelyne Ducharme [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 45

Finally, My Beloved Rémi

Despite my tireless search, no trace of my beloved Rémi, nor of my uncle's family, could I unearth. Like so many others, they had doubtless been swallowed by the ever-growing tide of emigration — that slow hemorrhage of our people, the fruit of a negligent and criminal government and of the British yoke that stifled all economic awakening in its colonies, preferring to flood them with the sterile bounty of its own manufactories.

It was one day, beneath the austere skies of late February or early March, that destiny finally set her hand upon my path. I had been sent to the outer suburbs to visit an aged couple, their misery warmly recommended to my care by Monsieur Gustave Larouche, the sub-director of the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Society.

Under my arm, swaddled in newspaper like a treasure, I carried a great loaf of bread cleft in two, embracing between its generous halves a thick slab of bacon — a king's feast for these wretched souls.

The street along which I walked had been rough-hewn through the high drifts by the labors of the municipal plough: a colossal triangle of timbers dragged by a yoked team of mighty Percherons, their flanks steaming like chimneys in the cold. From the neighboring road came the cracking of whips and the stentorian cries of the carters :

— Ho !... Dia !...

Suddenly, crouched at the roadside like a forgotten relic of human suffering, I glimpsed a beggar bundled in rags, his figure almost lost in the snow. He wore a familiar jacket — a worn seminarian's coat, with its ghostly white straps — and for an instant my heart faltered. Those

Red River

same jackets, once donned by the sons of privilege, now lived a second, humbler life upon the backs of the city's dispossessed.

I had no coins to offer. Instead, I bestowed upon him what little wealth I carried : a smile, full of warmth and compassion.

The man lifted his eyes to mine and said, with a voice roughened by frost :

—*Thank you... God will repay you.*

The ambiguity of his words troubled me: did he bless me for my kindness, or rebuke me for the poverty of it ? Dissatisfied with myself, I turned back.

—*You must be very hungry ?* I asked him.

—*Yes!* he said simply.

At that moment, the light struck his face — and I beheld, beneath the ragged tuque, familiar brown locks, and a spark of life that no hardship could extinguish. My heart leapt; my voice trembled :

—*I have bread and bacon. Will you share it? Tell me — do you know a Rémi Bernier ?*

The young man eyed me warily.

—*I knew a Rémi Bernier... but he's gone to the States.*

—*When?*

—*Last fall.*

—*Was his uncle's name Ildefonse ?*

Red River

—*Yes, it was.*

My heart, buoyed with hope, sank once more.

—*That is a pity. He is my cousin, and I have come from Rivière-aux-Rats in search of him.*

The man studied me for a long moment, then, plucking the icicles from his mustache and red beard, murmured almost shyly :

—I am Rémi Bernier. Two years ago, I came to you. Do you not remember ?

The world seemed to fall away. I was ecstatic, beyond all words, drunk with joy. I had found him ! At last !

I seized him, half-dragging, half-leading him back to my poor hotel. The receptionist, seeing us, frowned suspiciously, but I reassured him with the payment for a second room. That night, Rémi told me the long and tragic story of his descent.

They had left Québec in 1848, led by the vain hope that Montréal would offer work. They marched first to Trois-Rivières, then onward, arriving in the city as the summer sun crowned the River St. Lawrence.

But Montréal's promises were lies. Work was scarce ; wages, a pittance. With heavy hearts, his family had continued southward, chasing the American mirage. Only Rémi, stubborn and full of pride, remained behind — and suffered for it. In the spring, at last defeated, he too was going to begin the journey into exile.

As I listened, my heart ached with pity and tenderness. I took him under my wing, nursed him, fed him, and willed him back to life. His youth answered the call : the color returned to his cheeks, the strength to his limbs. Taller, broader, more magnificent even than the boy I had

Red River

once loved in secret, my Rémi rose like a young oak battered but unbroken by the storm.

Soon, we dreamed together. On Sundays, when I could abandon my boy's disguise, I dressed as a girl and walked proudly by his side, down the bustling quays of the Saint-Laurent River, past the fiddlers who welcomed the endless tide of immigrants. I thought — foolishly, perhaps — that I had captured my happiness forever.

Hand in hand, heart near to heart, we strolled. I longed for the day I could hold him, not just by the hand, but wholly — as a wife holds her husband. At night, when the bitter cold pressed against the windows and the mercury fell like a stone, temptation gripped me cruelly.

My faithful Malou — dear guardian of my virtue — sensed it, too. Whenever I kissed Rémi goodnight, the wolf would thrust his great head between us, as if to remind me of my better angels.

—*Your dog is jealous, Alexie*, laughed Rémi.

I sometimes suggested that we get married, but Rémi was my wild mustang who refused to be tamed :

—We're not going to put that yoke around our necks for the rest of our lives. We're still far too young!”

But I hadn't said my last word. He finally found a job in a shoe factory.

As for me, I kept my job as a waiter at the tavern. With two salaries, we had just enough to start a family, and I still had in the back of my mind the idea of getting married.

One day, I let him kiss me more than I should have, then I gently pushed him away and whispered with a sweet smile :

Red River

—No, my beloved Rémi! There are some things that are only done in marriage ! ... Perhaps you want us to get married ?

My mother would have been so proud to hear me say that.

It was this clever ruse that led him to give up his cherished freedom for me. His determination and his beloved freedom melted like lard in a frying pan. Finally, a date was set with Vicar Sanschagrin of our parish to celebrate our marriage

On a morning flooded with golden sunlight, with only a handful of beggars as witnesses, Rémi and I were united. Our wedding clothes were borrowed from a second-hand shop : his greatcoat too short for his mighty frame, his top-hat slightly askew; yet he seemed to me a prince from a fairy tale.

Malou, ever loyal, was rewarded with a feast of marrow bones, while we celebrated with tourtières and stewed pig's feet, sharing what little we had with the hungry souls of the Hôtel Rasco, until our own plates were empty and our hearts full.

Thus began our life together — poor in gold, but richer than kings in love.

I wrote to my parents, pouring my soul into the letter, asking forgiveness. But no answer ever came. Perhaps their pardon, like so much else, had to wait for Heaven.

No matter. We had found happiness — and happiness, once found, must be guarded with both hands, lest it fly away like a frightened bird.

Though the road was hard, it was beautiful. For those who love truly, every stone is a jewel, and every wound a wound of glory.

Red River

And thus, my beloved Rémi and I, amid pestilence and poverty,
built our humble Eden.

And I wish for you, dear reader, no lesser happiness than this.



The man lifted his eyes to mine and said,
with a voice roughened by frost :
—*Thank you... God will repay you.*

BOOK II

Chapter I

We'll Be Coureurs-de-bois

In the twilight of the winter of 1851, when Montréal's ancient maples stirred once more with the first whisperings of spring, their slender buds, famished for light, swelled beneath the pale kisses of the reluctant sun.

Around them, the snowbanks —soiled, tattered, humiliated— sank furtively into the parched, brown earth, vanishing like defeated armies under the banners of a conquering season.

It was then that Rémi and I, bound before God and before the good Abbé Sanschagrin, tasted the honeyed bewilderment of our first days of marriage. In the warm secrecy of our poor hotel room, the pleasures of love, lavish and tempestuous, still cloaked the squalor of our existence. Yet too much delight, like wine too sweet, soon cloy the senses. And beneath the shimmering tide of our young passion, the dark reef of reality began to rise.

—*Listen, Rémi, I said one evening, as the feeble glow of our lamp threw shadows like phantoms against the peeling walls. Here, in this pestilent Hotel Rasco, where only fleas and sorrows thrive, we shall raise but a brood of sickness and despair... Should misfortune tear from us even the little we possess, we shall be cast into the streets, as you were, dear heart, when your uncle abandoned you.*

Rémi, ever the cherub of hope, pressed my hands between his broad palms and murmured:

Red River

—*Where you go, Alexie, I would follow to the ends of the world.*

Ah, what music there was in those two simple syllables of his name — Ré-mi ! They rang within my heart like the bell-notes of some far-off, enchanted cathedral.

Since my arrival from Rivière-aux-Rats, I had toiled in the smoky tavern of Montréal, with my faithful companion Malou —half Alaskan wolf, half spirit of the snowfields— lounging at my feet, breathing in the sour fumes of drunkenness with an air of indolent disdain. Some days, I envied him.

Yet survival demanded cunning. To slip unnoticed among those sodden patrons, I had clothed myself in boys' garments. As my mother —always the ghostly chaperone of my conscience— would repeat :

—*Dream not, Alexie. The world bends to no girl's whim !*

Thus disguised, I moved unmolested through that sordid paradise, where men, inflamed by cheap alcohol, let their souls rot in the stagnant pools of their servitude to Queen Victoria. In that grim colony, whose industries were strangled in their cradle by the hand of London, misery grew like moss in the damp cellars of the heart.

Montréal, beautiful but desolate, weighed heavily upon us. We longed to flee — to breathe free, to sow new dreams in a soil not cursed by foreign laws.

The United States, we heard, with its fields of cotton reaped by the tragic hands of slaves, offered work, gold, and freedom. My husband's parents had already abandoned the stony fields of Québec for the teeming factories of New England.²¹

²¹ One of the descendants of these unfortunate emigrants who took refuge in the USs will become the 46th Président (Joseph Robinette Biden, Ribinette being his mother's name).

Red River

One evening, at the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul office, a gaunt journalist from *La Minerve* confided in me:

—The British crown forbids us to weave our own cloth, to forge our own iron. All that we are allowed is to feed their mills with timber, wheat, and furs. That is why England grows fat while Canada starves.

I recalled then the grave words of Monsieur Légaré, a worldly man whose plain name belied a shrewd mind :

—The Americans built their wealth only after casting off their colonial masters. We must do the same—or perish!

Was it truly so? To the cautious mind, rebellion seemed a perilous path. To the heart, aflame with injustice, it seemed destiny. When I asked Abbé Fleury, our parish vicar, whether independence might save us, he twisted the buttons of his camail—a gesture he reserved for dangerous truths—and replied:

—Yes, Alexie. If we dare proclaim a republic.

A republic! The very word was forbidden fruit, ripe with the taste of liberty — and peril. It stirred something fierce and yearning within me, though I scarce knew its full meaning.

Abbé Fleury's voice rose in a litany of contempt :

—The London Parliament is but a bunch of bankers. Their ministers, their senators — lackeys of gold and greed ! They are no more friends of democracy than wolves are of lambs.

And as he pronounced the dreadful word *plutocracy*, his face darkened, and I saw, reflected in his eyes, the anguish of an entire betrayed people.

Red River

Yet it was not only politics that churned the restless river of our fate. Destiny itself, cloaked in the garb of chance, nudged me down an unsuspected path. In a drunken tavern conversation, I heard of the *British East India Company* — the secret sovereign of a subjugated India. I walked to their office on rue Saint-Nicholas, driven by a hunger for the unknown.

The clerk there, a wiry Highlander with wary eyes, confessed to me in a whisper that the sepoy — the native soldiers of India — were stirring to revolt against the cruelty of their masters.

—*But hush ! he said. It is not safe to pity them aloud.*

I, dressed again as a boy, inquired whether I could join their ranks ; but the Highlander, studying my slender frame, advised me instead to seek fortune at the Hudson's Bay Company. There, at least, a man could speak French — and survive.

Thus, it was that Rémi and I, hand in hand, ventured to the spring fair at Lachine, where the fur companies, drunk on gold and ambition, wooed the wild blood of young Canadians.

There, among the rows of furs and the clamor of recruiters, I saw the dance of temptation. Veterans, their faces lined with stories and drink, spun tales of rivers wide as oceans, of skies sown with stars, of feasts hunted by the blast of a single musket. They laughed, they lied, they bewitched.

With the trembling courage of fools, we signed.

—*Alexis de La Durantaye*, I wrote in a bold hand, my true name masked behind a boy's.

The recruiter, a Scottish giant, sneered at my small frame.

—*Your muscles are lacking*, he said.

Red River

—*My muscles are here*, I retorted, tapping my forehead.

He laughed bitterly :

—*You shall soon learn modesty, boy.*

No sooner had Rémi signed his own pledge than we were both bound to the vast, savage North. A rifle, light and ancient, became our sole companion — the Charlesville musket, descendant of the Revolution's thunder.

And thus, beneath a sky still cold with winter's dying breath, Rémi and I pledged ourselves to the unknown, to hardship, to hope. We would be Coureurs-de-bois, wanderers between earth and sky, pursuing freedom along the endless rivers of the world.



Abbé Fleury (shown above), knew very well that he was risking his position and his peacefulness by telling me that "his superior, Mgr. Bourget collaborated with the English colonial authorities, from whom he received a large pension, and without qualms excommunicated all the recalcitrant French Canadian who took side too openly against the British and in favor of the American Revolution.

Red River

Chapter 2 **Goodbye, Montréal!** (May 4, 1850)

On the morning of May 4, the sky above Lachine unfurled over the land its immaculate blue like a benediction, promising a spring day of rare splendor. Three herons, winged specters from a nearby islet, chased one another in wild, exuberant spirals, their cries overlapping in a joyous tumult, as if the whole world were awakening at once from the torpor of winter.

Along the banks of the Great River, a multitude of women and children thronged, their hands fluttering like broken wings, their tears beading the air with the salt of human sorrow.

The first departures from Lachine were not mere voyages ; they were solemn ceremonies, laden with hopes, with griefs, with silent prayers. Montréalers, drawn by a mixture of fascination and dread, crowded the shores to watch this procession into the unknown — a symbol that the merciless winter had loosened its grip, and that the Saint-Laurent had once again been delivered to the hands of men.

Far ahead of me, my beloved Rémi, whose hair had only recently been trimmed for our wedding, offered my gaze a gentle anchor, a sanctuary against the vertigo of farewell. Around us, flags danced madly in the breeze, but in the secret alcove of my heart, a pale veil of melancholy rose like mist from a cooling earth.

I had left Malou, my faithful wolfhound, in the reluctant care of a tavern-keeper. His final, plaintive whimper had pierced the tissue of my joy, weaving into it a thread of inconsolable sadness.

And yet, a greater sorrow still burned within me : that of abandoning my wounded homeland, scorned even by France, whose Navy

Red River

had defeated England at Chesapeake Bay, in 1781, but who, in her princely negligence, had left us to the cold domination of foreign masters.

I was eighteen. My parents still believed me cloistered somewhere between Montréal and Québec City, while in truth I was about to cast myself, like a grain of pollen, upon the great winds of the continent. My signature bound me only for a single expedition — or so I thought. In truth, it was for fifty long years... or rather, fifty short ones, for time is but a trickster, and life, a vanishing mist.

Some among us were leaving merely for the season; others — though they did not know it — were embarking upon a voyage without return. Blessed is ignorance that shields us from our destinies !

Once seated in our delicate birch canoes, we dared not move too much, lest the frail vessels take on water and drown our fragile hopes.

—*En avant ! Forward !* cried our leader, raising his oar like a gleaming standard.

—*Adieu, Canada et Canadiens !* sobbed one of the voyageurs, casting a last desperate gaze to the shrinking shore.

Freed by the anchor-men standing knee-deep on the shoals, our fifteen canoes caught the current and slid forward, the rowers' oars dipping in a measured, sorrowful cadence. At the guide's signal, we gave three resounding hurrahs, then fell into a chant — a great, rolling lament that wove our grief into the very breath of the river.

The canoes glided onward like a funeral cortege, as the sobs of mothers and wives were carried after us on the thin morning breeze. Some of us had fortified our courage with drink, masking our anguish with bravado; others wept openly, their mothers' ghostly hands seeming to caress them across the widening waters.

Red River

Most had signed their contracts in taverns under the spell of alcohol, deceived by a perfidious generosity. Now they were to pay with their very lives: to leave their families, perhaps forever, and to exchange the rich valleys of the Saint-Laurent River —cradle of our francophone civilization— for the brutal vastness of the unknown.

As for me, despite my aching heart, I clung to the illusion of a happy return by autumn's end. I would escape, I thought, not only from poverty and disease, but from the hypocrisy of a society where wealth passed for virtue and the cunning devoured the weak with the blessing of gold and God alike.

In my mind's eye, I was the caterpillar reborn as butterfly, slipping free of the deadweight of the past, eager to dance with the wildflowers and the winds.

A mother duck and her six ducklings floated serenely across our path; our front guide held his oar aloft, stilling our expedition so as not to disturb this humble procession of innocence.

Faces paraded across the misted horizon of my memory : my parents in Chicoutimi, my brothers and sisters, and even the blacksmith of Baie-des-Ha!-Ha!, the suitor foisted upon me whose looming presence had precipitated my flight. When would I see them again ? How fortunate, perhaps, that I did not know the answer was "never." When I returned — at the close of a century — they would all be dust, their names barely murmured among strangers. My own bloodline would forget my face, my voice.

But for now, the blindness of youth cradled me, and I sailed out into life's vast tempest with a glad and ignorant heart.

Around my neck, a green scarf fluttered; others wore theirs knotted about their heads like the *tuque*, to bind their streaming hair and absorb the sweat that sprang, even now, from their fevered brows. Like my brothers-in-adventure, I wore a red tartan shirt, a red wool toque,

Red River

deerskin *mitasses* on my legs, and moccasins supple as a second skin. My *braies* left my thighs bare to the wild air. Yet none, save Rémi, guessed that beneath this costume beat the heart of a woman.

The fringed ends of my arrowed sash fell proudly to my left, a silent herald of my hidden truth. From it dangled my fire-bag, crammed with tinder, flint, and marcasite, and my otter-skin bag-for-pétun, where black tobacco cradled my few scattered coins.

Slung from the same sash was my musket bag, and at my side hung the hatchet that had once routed a bear in the Saguenay Fjord — and another beast, more human, in the back rooms of a Montréal tavern.

Each man —and I among them— kept axe or musket within reach, weapons tucked among the fragile bales wrapped in oilcloth.

Our canoes bore, too, the relics of our survival : kettles for tea, sponges for bailing, frying pans, cauldrons, hatchets, awls, bundles of *ouatapi* roots for binding repairs, and five kilograms of spruce gum, that sacred resin that alone could patch the wounds of our fragile birch-bark hulls. For in our world, there was no luxury of mending — only the urgency of survival.



Priv.Coll.

Red River

Chapter 3

En route for the Red River !

Our brigade, valiant and solemn, comprised fifteen proud canoes : eleven massive *canots-de-Maistre*, three swift *canots-du-Nord* destined to remain in the shadowy vastness of Rupert's Land, and a single *canot-bâtard* — a humble intermediary between these titans.

From the shores of Lachine and Montréal, one after another, these daring expeditions unfurled their banners to the morning wind and vanished into the distance : *Michilimackinac*, *Baie-Verte*, *Grand-Portage*, *Prairie-du-Chien*, *Notre-Dame-du-Détroit* — names that rang like distant bells across the watery wilderness.

Forty canoes, colossal *canots-de-Maistre*, bore the Michilimackinac brigade to the mighty head of the Great Lakes. Yet these lumbering leviathans, hampered by their deep drafts, were forced to turn back before the savage northern rapids, as if the very land itself barred their passage.

Other brigades, more venturesome, braved the Richelieu River, descended the sinuous Hudson, then climbed the Belle-Rivière, daring the wild torrents of the Missouri in the service of the *American Fur Company*.

As for us, more prudent and perhaps more cunning, we chose the ancient shortcut of the Rivière-des-Outaouais [the Ottawa River], gateway to the forbidden Pays-d'en-Haut — towards the far and misty Red River, hidden deep within the brooding dominions of Rupert's Land.

Between the stern clamp of our canoe and its proud bow, where an Indian's head carved in heroic style seemed to gaze eternally into the future, ten men bent their backs to the river : the two *bouts*, perched like

Red River

sentinels at prow and stern, and the *milieux*, six to eight sturdy oarsmen who rowed with the patient ardor of monks. The *bouts*, the vigilant guardians of our fate, held the heavy oars, steering us through unseen reefs and treacherous waters; their vigilance was our salvation, and their silence, understood at a glance, was more eloquent than speech.

Above even these noble helmsmen, standing apart in their dignity, were the interpreters, those rare masters of tongues who commanded the highest wages. As for me, a mere *milieu*, I wielded a modest oar, scarcely sixty centimeters in length, its blade narrow as a saber — a weapon, not of war, but of endurance.

Among the souls entrusted to our canoes, four were passengers of singular distinction. In our craft sat the chief of the expedition, a man as solid as the oak, one Donald MacDonald — a Scotchman whose forty years of life had etched a hard authority into his broad frame. Draped in a dark gray suit and crowned with a gleaming patent top-hat, he alone defied the voyageurs' humble tartan uniform, a symbol of his bourgeois station. His gaze, beneath thick brows, surveyed the river not with the wonder of the pilgrim, but with the calculation of a conqueror.

In another canoe, smaller and frailer, traveled a very different being : Sister Jeanne d'Arc, a Grey Nun with a heart of fire beneath her simple cornet. Hers was not the journey of ambition, but of sacrifice: she went to lose herself in the lonely missions of the *Petit-Nord*, armed only with faith, knowledge, and an invincible tenderness.

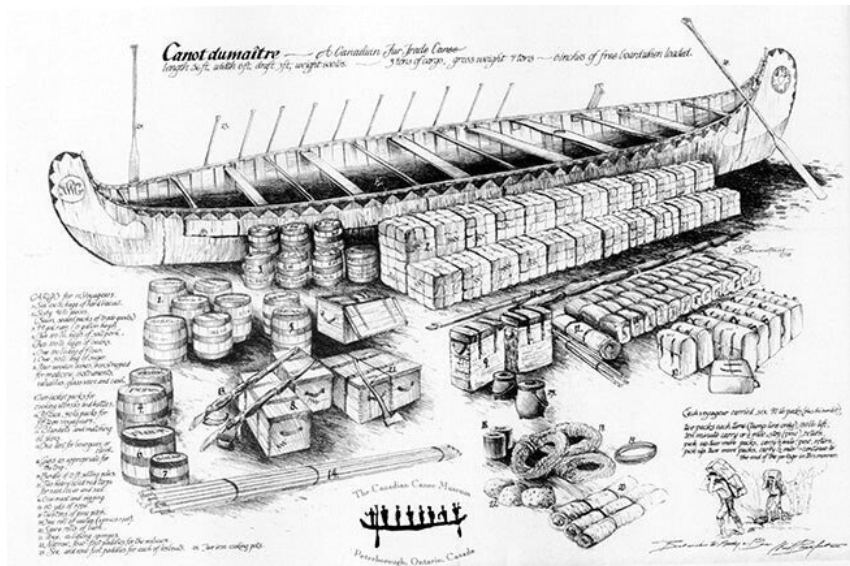
Two other canoes carried their own burden of silent importance — each bore an accountant, men of figures and ledgers, Jean-François d'Arcy and Théophile Landry, voyaging to far-flung trading posts to measure the commerce of the wilderness in sober ink.

Thus did our brigade swell to one hundred and forty-eight living souls — a small nation adrift upon the rivers of an untamed world. Imagine, if you will, the grand pageant of those May mornings when dozens of such expeditions, heavy with hope and peril, unfurled from Montréal

Red River

like petals from a great fleur-de-lis, carrying the lifeblood of the fur trade across half a continent. Even the *American Fur Companies*, recognizing the ancient, stubborn genius of the French-Canadians, entrusted their fortunes to us : for the Chinouk, the true tongue of the wilderness, was but our Canadian French, seasoned with Indian syllables and, later, salted with English.

From the ruins of New France, where once stood proud battlements now overgrown with vines, Montréal had risen anew, not with swords, but with canoes — the true empire of the forest and the river.



Chapter 4
Rowing like Madmen

Carried away by a thirst for adventure —and perhaps, in the secret recesses of my heart, by the furtive murmur of ambition— I had managed to unearth the mercantile secrets of our trade. The *bouts* were to receive two hundred and fifty *pelues*, and we, humble intermediaries, two hundred for three months' work, not to mention a premium of seventy kilograms of merchandise to be resold at our peril to the highest bidder.

—*Why not become a guide or an interpreter?* I mused, with the naïveté of youth. For had I not heard that these noble functions enjoyed a prestige —and a premium— that lifted their bearers above the common rowers?

Ah! How little I knew the world! To be an interpreter, one had to possess the liquid sonorities of an Indian tongue; to be a guide, one had to have aged within the folds of this wilderness, to know by heart each treacherous reef, each foaming rapid, each secret portage where the river grinds against the rock like a beast against its chains.

Perhaps it would be wiser, I thought, to apprentice myself to the caulkers who stitched the bark and sealed the wounds of our canoes with gleaming resin; or to dream of becoming a cook, a master of songs, even a hunter —all trades that, at each halt, gilded the daily bread with the shimmer of fortune.

But still, I was a child speaking without knowledge. The rapids and, more cruel still, the portages would soon disabuse me of my illusions.

—You'll get your pay when you return, just like in the merchant navy ! one old hand shouted over the creaking bundles.

Red River

—*To prevent desertions !* sneered my neighbor, a grin of bitter experience twisting his lips. *And if you happen to die, well — the Company pockets your wages, unless a lucky soul comes soon enough to claim them !*

—*Bandits !* growled a voice from the ranks.

I had squeezed myself into a narrow crevice between the bulging cubic bundles of goods —each a burden of ninety pounds— a cargo of muskets, powder horns, woolen blankets, hardtack, salted meat, small barrels of fiery drink, and a miscellany of trinkets destined for barter with the sons of the forest.

Amidst it all, jostled like cargo, two pigs grunted their disdain, while five hens and a defiant rooster kept a sovereign court, greeting each daybreak with their insufferable crowing, even long after we had broken camp.

The passengers, poor souls, were wedged in among the rowers, huddled low at the canoe's center of gravity, like the seeds of a shaken pod. Before me lay my musket, its polished flintlock plate catching the cruel light of the morning sun, blinding me. Hastily, I shifted its position, and checked again that the bayonet was firmly tied, lest it should slip and vanish into the river's oblivion.

Farther along the keel, towering above the others like a mast above the deck, sat my Rémi —a veritable oak among saplings. Most employers, mindful of rations and space, preferred men of modest stature : small bodies consumed less bread, less space, less time.

But the great drain of bodies had forced the Companies to scrape the bottom of the barrel, enlisting the giants and the frail alike. Thus my Rémi —six feet five inches of strength and beauty— had found a place beside me, with my wiry frame and my narrow shoulders, a study in contrast to his robust figure.

Red River

Only one man rivaled him in size: the Bourgeois himself, Scotsman Donald MacDonald, who, armed with the double sword of English and French, commanded both the London lords and the sons of New France —those brave voyageurs and coureurs-de-bois who gave flesh and soul to the trade of furs and blood.

As soon as we dipped our oars into the water, each *chantre*, each master of songs, lifted up his chosen melody —one for each canoe— a battle-hymn to quicken the spirit and lend rhythm to our labor. The light *lège* canoes raced forward with easy grace; the massive *canots-de-Maitre*, laden with their tons of fortune, lumbered behind like elephants crossing a river.

The endless chanting, blending with the creak of wood and the slap of water, hypnotized us. Without thought, our mouths repeated what the song-master intoned ; our arms rose and fell, rose and fell, like the tides themselves. Our bodies obeyed, but our minds, freed from the prison of flesh, drifted into wild realms —across shimmering lakes where the mist kissed the waves, through shadowed valleys where unseen rivers sang to the moon.

Thus began our great voyage into the wilderness: not merely across land and water, but across the vast, uncharted ocean of the soul.



The voyageurs. (Priv. Coll.)

Chapter 5

The Saint Patroness of the Voyageurs

An hour or two after our departure from Lachine, the oars still dripping with the morning mist, our brigade of canoes touched land at the very tip of the *Island of Montréal*. There, like a sentinel watching over the waters, stood the charming church of *Sainte-Anne-du-Bout-de-l'Île*, guardian and patroness of all those who ventured into the wild immensities of the Pays-d'en-Haut.

This humble sanctuary marked the sacred threshold where the majestic Ottawa River surrendered itself to the Great Saint Lawrence. Here, from time immemorial, every departing brigade had paused — those bound for the illimitable forests of the Great Lakes, for the distant plains of Illinois, or for the rugged shores of the Missouri country. All alike, *coureurs-de-bois* and *voyageurs*, hardened men though they were, knelt upon the rocky ground and lifted supplicant voices toward the Heavens.

—*Holy Virgin, preserve us from death and misfortune!* murmured the rough voices, half in jest, half in secret dread.

For if bravado reigned on their lips, fear of the unknown still gnawed at their hearts. It was a perilous trade we plied — a trade where youth was often buried in nameless graves under alien skies, and where divine favor, however uncertain, remained the last and slender refuge of mortal fragility.

Even as we arrived, we beheld, vanishing into the mist, the grand procession of forty *canots-de-Maître* — proud vessels destined for Michilimackinac, that fabled outpost of empire where forest and waterway met like ancient kings in conclave. As for us, humbler in ambition but no less fervent in spirit, we knelt long in prayer. We burned lanterns whose

Red River

trembling flames seemed to carry our souls upward on invisible wings, and deposited our modest offerings in the heavy trunk reserved for the repose of our fallen brothers.

Each humble *penny* we surrendered was a cry for mercy, an insurance against the eternal night. And it was not only we, the simple voyageurs, who honored this sacred rite. Even the Protestant bourgeois, wary perhaps of Heaven's caprices or reluctant to tempt Fate, did not scorn the ancient custom. I saw with my own eyes our leader, Donald McDonald, lay a glittering golden guinea upon the altar, and cross himself with the piety of a medieval knight.

The priest celebrated Mass, his voice rising solemnly above the murmur of the river, and recounted the venerable tale of the chapel's birth:

"It was in the bitter winter of 1711, when the Reverend Father Breslay, venturing upon the treacherous ice of the River Saint Lawrence, was hurled from his sleigh and abandoned to the merciless frost. His horse, faithful and panic-stricken, fled to the village. At the very edge of death, the priest vowed a chapel to Saint Anne if salvation were granted him.

No sooner had his prayer escaped his lips than villagers, alarmed by the lone horse, rushed to his rescue. Thus was this shrine raised, a stone of gratitude upon the altar of life."

Meditating upon these mysteries, the silent miracles born of faith and despair, we once more took up our paddles and cast ourselves into the vast solitude. The waters of the Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes opened before us like a road into legend, and soon the great artery of the Ottawa River bore us onward — a river of destiny stretching 1,271 kilometers into the heart of the wilderness, toward the silvered shores of Lake Huron.

In this floating army, each rank was marked by its position. The bourgeois and his two clerks, lords of our fragile flotilla, wore garments

Red River

of supple leather, impervious to wind and rain. But we, the voyageurs, could not afford such finery. Heavy leathers, soaked with sweat and river water, become leaden and unwearable.

We clad ourselves instead in the simple fabrics of linen and cotton — light, quick to dry, forgiving of hardship. Our toques and sashes, woven from the wool of the sheep, adorned us with humble pride. Only our moccasins and mittens, of softest hide, betrayed a concession to necessity over poverty.

Thus did we move forward, an exiled nation upon the waters, propelled by dreams, chained by duty, and protected, perhaps, by the faint mercy of saints and mysterious powers.

Sainte-Anne-du-Bout-de-l'Île [Priv.Coll]



Red River

Chapter 6 First Problems

The great Rivière-des-Outaouais or Ottawa River — that royal highway to Hudson's Bay and the fabled Red River — swallowed our frail canoe as a muskellunge devours a trembling fly. At every stroke of the paddle, the immense artery of water seemed to breathe around us, heaving with the strength of ancient forces.

Under this merciless exertion, my arms, long unaccustomed to such superhuman labor (not since my fugitive wanderings from Chicoutimi the year before), soon rebelled, throbbing with a fiery pain that shot from wrist to shoulder.

Already, I was suffering. In vain did I try to lose myself in the mechanical cadence of the oars, that mournful litany of effort punctuated by the hoarse chants of the voyageurs.

—Alexis, row farther from the canoe, tabarnouche! You'll scratch the bark! thundered the helmsman.

The two "bouts," perched at prow and stern, watched us like falcons, and we owed them a blind and absolute obedience. Our hair, flowing to the shoulders in the old style of the coureurs-de-bois, was held back by headbands or toques, which served also to catch the torrents of sweat stinging our eyes. The oars we wielded —shaped from linden and cedar, the most supple of woods— seemed to grow heavier with every league we conquered.

—At the end of the day, one of the bouts cried, you'll mark your oar with your sign or your number. If you drown, or smash yourself on the rocks, your oar will stand at your grave, crowned with a wooden cross.

—And who will come to pray for us ? asked a voice from the ranks.

Red River

—*Dragonflies ! another jeered.*

—*Keep your seal blubber handy ! the bout roared again. The black flies and mosquitoes will be at your blood before the sun sinks low.*

Despite our long hair, whipping our necks like angry horse tails, black flies soon became entangled in it, forming a disgusting crown of martyrdom. Already, our bodies, so clean in the first enthusiasm of the departure, steamed and glistened with sweat. We would not know the sweetness of water nor soap again for months.

By dusk, exhausted, we would collapse like dead men upon the bare earth, indifferent even to our own filth. Cleanliness, in truth, was a trifling concern in the wild immensity where survival itself was a daily triumph.

At long intervals, perhaps every forty or fifty kilometers, the mournful dirge of a sawmill would disturb the crystalline silence of the river, a crude anthem of iron and wood. Elsewhere, only the *susurrus* of the breeze and the silvery sigh of our paddles caressed the vast solitude. Here and there, rafts of logs, yoked like oxen to the riverbanks, awaited their masters. Intrepid draymen armed with peavies and spiked turners, danced from log to log with the lightness of acrobats, taunting death with every step. We, in passing, saluted them with broad grins, exchanging in that fleeting glance the brotherhood of men who tread daily upon the brink of the abyss.

—*Don't give up, tabarnac !* shouted a *bout* as we neared our first real trial: the dread *Rapide-de-Carillon*.

There, we were forced to unload the precious cargo, haul it like beasts of burden across long stretches of ragged ground, and reload the canoes further upstream. Our weary bones scarcely had time to rest before the next ordeal came — the *Rapide-de-la-Chute-à-Blondeau*.

Red River

And still onward we went, westward slowed by the river's mighty pulse. Soon the broad waterway narrowed into a snarling gorge, its waves leaping and crashing like a herd of maddened buffalo pursued by hunters. We had arrived at the *Sault-de-la-Chaudière*, once known as *Le Long-Sault*.

Here, our guide—who liked to inform us in our rare moments of idleness—chose to tell us a story that would sear into our memories :

—*Right here, my friends*, he began, his voice low and heavy with ancient sorrow, *here, exactly one hundred and ninety years ago, a handful of our ancestors wrote in their blood the noblest page of New France.*

He paused, letting the weight of silence thicken around us, then continued:

—*Ville-Marie, that we call Montréal today, had but three or four hundred souls then. Yet news reached them that six or seven hundred Iroquois warriors were gathering to strike, to snuff out the life of the colony like a candle in the wind. So it was that Adam Dollard, Sieur des Ormeaux, resolved to meet them here, at the throat of the Ottawa River.*

He gestured at the surging waters, where the ghost of Dollard seemed still to linger.

—*With sixteen Frenchmen and forty Huron allies, he fortified an abandoned Algonquin palisade entwined with wild bindweed. The Iroquois came—a black tide of vengeance—and hurled themselves against the barricades.*”

—*And what happened, guide ?* cried one of us, too impatient to contain himself.

—*It is coming... it is coming...* murmured the guide.

For a moment, he stared into the distance, then spoke again :

Red River

—Attack after attack they repelled. The earth shook beneath the fury. Yet their enemies grew more numerous. Many Hurons, seduced by false promises of mercy, deserted to join the Iroquois. But the sixteen Frenchmen and six steadfast Huron chiefs refused to yield. The Iroquois, enraged, made ready for a final assault...”

—A final assault ? breathed someone, as though afraid to hear the end.

—Yes... a final assault. The guide's eyes darkened: *A dreadful hand-to-hand struggle ensued. At last, five Frenchmen remained. They were captured, tortured to death, and eaten, so that the victors might devour their courage and avenge their own eighty dead.”*

—And the Hurons who betrayed them ? another asked.

—They were slaughtered, despite the treacherous promises. Betrayal never profits the coward.

The guide fell silent. We each bowed our heads, as if those long-dead heroes were still watching from the mists that curled above the rapids. And in the solemn hush, each of us knew : we had inherited not only the rivers and forests of New France — but also its sorrows, its glories, and its graves.

Voyageurs and coureurs-de-bois' packs (41^{kg} each), filled with merchandise on the way west, and fur on the way back east, were wrapped in waterproof oilcloth. Alexie carried only one during her portages, and Rémi three. (Priv. Coll.)



Chapter 7
The Brawls of the Destitute

The next day, our brigade rowed serenely along the shadowy expanse of the Bytown lumberyards, when suddenly the air, once alive with the hymns of our paddles, was rent by a hideous cacophony. The rhythmic chants, blooming from every canoe like so many fragrant flowers, wilted under the brutal assault of those dissonant cries that cascaded from the steep cliffs bordering the southern shore.

A lone figure, perched atop the rocky escarpment, flailed his arms wildly and bellowed :

— *Come on, fellow voyageurs! Come ashore ! The Irish Shiners are upon us ! We are but fifty souls, and they descend in a horde of a hundred ! Come, lend us your fists !*

—*Tabarnouche ! To arms, lads !* roared the helmsmen of each canoe, their voices lashing the water like whips of command.

In a heartbeat, the slender barks nosed into the shallows. At each prow, the guide seized the least robust among us to leap ashore and tether the canoe like a living anchor. I, too, was chosen — spared, perhaps, from greater tribulation, for the battle to come would be fought without weapons, with nothing but the naked fist to determine the law of the strong.

Our Bourgeois, that fiery son of Caledonia, leapt to the ground, his broad fists clenched in ancestral fervor :

—*I'll go too! There are old scores yet to settle between Scots and Irish !*

And raising his arm toward the seething melee, he thundered in the language of Albion:

Red River

— *Remember Vinegar Hill !*

The arrival of our *coureurs-de-bois*, wild and unshackled as forest wolves, turned the tide. Side by side with the French-Canadian lumberjacks — valiant men led by the towering Jos Montferrand, a titan whose vigor eclipsed even that of my own husband — we broke the enemy ranks as a storm shatters a field of wheat.

The Shiners, routed and bloodied, fled in disorder, pursued by the tempestuous cries of the victors. The shore, the woods, the very air seemed strewn with bruised and battered bodies. Sister Jeanne d’Arc, the tender angel of our brigade, had no rest that night, binding wounds and offering comfort to the fallen.

As we stood amidst the wreckage of the clash, I turned to her, troubled :

—*But who are these Shiners, Sister ?*

—*They are poor Irish, she replied gravely, imported by English hands to carve the Rideau Canal from the wilderness. When the work was finished, they were thrown into the streets like broken tools. In their hunger, they sought to seize the scant work left to our own countrymen. Thus brother turns against brother, and the English master smiles.*

— *So, these are battles between destitute Catholic souls, while the Protestant magnates count their profits ?*

—*Yes, she sighed. And each blow struck here only tightens the yoke upon all our necks.*

—*The tall top hats their masters wear — they seem almost to mock us, to crown themselves with the fruits of our miseries.*

— *You see truly, said Sister Jeanne d’Arc, her voice imbued with a sorrow that seemed older than the river itself. They wear them like the*

Red River

*emblems of invisible thrones, seated atop a mountain of human sweat
and broken hopes.*



**Representation of two 41^{kg} packs portage,
using a strap on the forehead. Priv.Coll.**

Red River

Chapter 8 **Portage Incident**

Each evening, as twilight spread its violet wings across the firmament, and the dying embers of day clung like fading memories to the riverbanks, the commander of our brigade would decree the place of our nightly bivouac. With a solemn gesture, he would guide the canoes toward the shadowed shore. Once free of the current's grip, the oarsmen would leap into the shallows, their moccasins sinking into the yielding silt.

—*We make landfall ! Halt the canoes ! Secure the boats !* came the vibrant cry, as inevitable as a tolling bell.

One man, always the least robust among us, was chosen to serve as a living anchor, holding fast the prow against the river's pull. Meanwhile, the others waded through the water to disembark our esteemed passengers : the Grey Nun, the two accountants, and the Bourgeois himself.

Each traveler was carefully borne upon the shoulders of a voyageur, so that no delicate foot might feel the indignity of the river's icy touch.

As for the Grey Nun, she was cradled in a strongman's arms like a fragile relic. The first time, crimson flooding her cheeks and her 'R's rolling richly in the Montréal fashion, she exclaimed with comic alarm :

—*Scrrrupulous women would not be at ease here !*

It was upon the third evening of our arduous odyssey that fate, capricious and cruel, elected to leave its indelible mark upon my soul — a mark so vivid that even now, when the specter of Death, that old

Red River

Camarde, lingers at my threshold, I know it will be the last ember of youth left to flicker in my dimming mind.

The sun had scarcely kissed the horizon when, after sixteen merciless hours at the oars, we reached the portage. It fell to me —thin as a reed, scarcely forty-five kilograms soaking wet— to carry none other than the Bourgeois himself: the redoubtable Scotsman Donald MacDonald, who in girth and grandeur outweighed me thrice over, tipping the scales at over one hundred and ten kilograms and standing taller than any pine in the clearing.

Summoning what reckless valor youth alone can muster, I called out :

—*Bourgeois, it is my turn to disembark you !*

An almost imperceptible murmur passed among the men. The Bourgeois, casting a doubtful eye over my slight frame, responded, his accent carving the air :

—*Perhaps ye'd rather bear the nun, Alexis...*

—*It is not my turn today, Bourgeois. Come !* I insisted, extending my narrow shoulders like a sacrificial altar.

With visible reluctance, the giant mounted my back. The tableau was ridiculous —a Goliath perched upon a reed— and it drew veiled smiles and furtive glances from the other voyageurs. I gritted my teeth as my body groaned under the crushing burden, and staggered forward, a marionette wobbling on the frayed strings of pride.

Above us, a blue jay mocked the scene from a withered branch, its guttural cry almost human in its derision:

—*♪♪ Ridiculous ! ♪♪ Grotesque ! ♪♪ Farcical !*

Red River

—*Wretched bird !* I thought bitterly.

Then, as if conjured by the jay's taunts, calamity struck. My foot, seeking purchase upon the treacherous stones, faltered. In a single, monumental heartbeat, the Bourgeois tumbled from my shoulders with a mighty splash that echoed through the twilight like cannon fire.

I can still see it : his ornate moccasins, bright with rassades, floating absurdly downstream like disillusioned lilies. The undertow seized his massive frame and bore him three meters before he thrashed to his feet, his copper mane dripping indignation.

He rose from the riverbed, a Leviathan wrathful and trembling. Placing his sodden top hat back on his head with a savage flourish, he roared in a cacophony of Gaelic, English, and French — a tempest of invective none could decipher, save himself.

Then, shaking like a storm-tossed mast, he sought me out with burning eyes, fists clenched, muscles tensed with the promise of vengeance. I braced myself inwardly, every nerve taut with fear. I would be beaten, and yet I resolved : if I were to fall, I would do so with open eyes, meeting violence without cowardice.

Instinctively, my fingers brushed the haft of my axe, the cool barrel of my Charlesville musket — both within arm's reach. One blow of that blade could have felled the enraged giant and sent him to the misty vales of Avallon... but my soul recoiled. I would not dishonor myself by striking an unarmed man.

The moment was upon me. He stumbled forward, cursing and slobbering, preparing to unleash his fury upon my defenseless form — when suddenly a shadow, swift and sure, interposed itself between us.

It was Rémi.

Red River

My beloved Rémi, whose muscles were tempered like steel, whose heart was a furnace of loyalty and courage, stood unflinching before the raging colossus. His voice, low and firm as the distant roll of thunder, broke the spell :

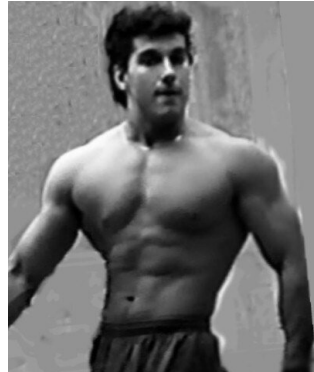
—Please, calm down, Bourgeois. Calm down, for God's sake. You are about to do something you will regret. This boy — he apologized. It was but an accident. Calm yourself, man !

For one breathless instant, the two giants stared into each other's souls, the river dripping from their clothes, the dying light glinting from their eyes.

Then, with a grunt almost tender in its weariness, the Bourgeois relented :

—You're right, Rémi. It was an accident. I accept your apology, Alexis. But... don't let it happen again.

And just like that, the tempest passed. No blow fell. No honor was lost. Only my gratitude remained, burning brightly within me like a votive candle : gratitude to Rémi, and to the Providence that had stilled the Bourgeois's wrath.



My beloved Rémi

Henceforth, Donald MacDonald, leader of our voyage, refused to entrust himself again to my frail shoulders — a small humiliation for him, but a great deliverance for me.

In the vast and perilous journey of life, one learns quickly the sacred art of compromise — that frail bridge suspended between dignity and survival.

Red River

Chapter 9 **At the Stopover**

When at last the passengers had been set ashore, trembling like birds extracted from a stormy sea, it was time to attend to the packs. Each parcel, each burden of forty-one kilograms, was carefully deposited along the riverbank, under the indifferent gaze of the slumbering forest.

Our mighty canots-de-Maistre, those gallant vessels that bore us like a dream over the glittering waters, could carry no less than four and a half tons of cargo, without reckoning their human freight.

Yet the boats themselves, though emptied, were no light things: soaked and waterlogged, they weighed between two hundred seventy-five and three hundred fifty kilograms.

At least four stout arms were needed to lift them, and with an infinite tenderness, as if handling the fragile bodies of newborns, the men turned the canoes over and laid them on beds of soft grass, lest the cruel teeth of crystalline rocks or the treacherous claws of broken branches rend their delicate bark skin.

All through the night, our freight —bundles, kegs, barrels wrapped in oilcloth— remained in solemn piles along the shore, indifferent to the sky, for no rain was to fall upon us that night.

On land, every soul surrendered to his appointed duty, as bees to the unseen orders of their hive. Hunters glided into the woods, silent as shadows, to tempt some foolish game into our snares. Others combed the forest floor for kindling, while the cooks busied themselves with their iron cauldrons. The caulkers bent over the hulls, their nimble fingers plugging the scars of the day's battle against the river.

Red River

Sister Jeanne d'Arc —the Grey Nun— moved among the wounded, an angel stitching closed the rents in mortal flesh, as the accountants and the Bourgeois calmly arranged their oilskins, cloaks, and blankets under the tents we had erected like small citadels against the night.

Our cook, a sorcerer of appetites, hurled several kilograms of dried peas into a colossal pot, adding, like a benediction, a multitude of bacon slices. As the stew thickened into a savory, golden purée, an intoxicating aroma rose into the air, invading our starving nostrils, gnawing at our exhausted hearts.

Ours was a famished brotherhood: voyageurs devoured without shame or daintiness, and our two daily meals — supper and the next day's brunch — were of heroic proportions, designed to steel us for the sixteen to eighteen hours of furious toil that awaited us.

It was nine o'clock. As I passed near my beloved Rémi, I caught his eye and whispered, my voice low with gratitude :

—Thank you, my husband. Without you, I would have been crushed like a reed beneath the boot of a brute.

He smiled — that luminous smile which, even in the darkening woods, seemed to kindle the stars themselves — and answered :

—You can count on me, my wife, always and everywhere.

—Thank you, my love !

—I was ready to smash his face to pieces for you.

—Fortunately, it didn't come to that.

Red River

Around us, the night swelled with laughter, fatigue, and the coarse jokes of voyageurs. I was drunk on happiness.

—*They look down on us, you know, Rémi added with a chuckle, the Bourgeois, the accountants, and the winterers alike. They call us “bacon-eaters.”²²*

—*What about the Winterers?* I asked, intrigued.

—*Those are the ones who stay all year in the Pays-d’en-Haut. They survive on pemmican : buffalo meat mixed with fat.*

—*Is it good ?*

—*At first, no. But when there’s nothing else, you learn to love even misery.*

The meal was devoured with ferocious joy. The wooden bowls were filled and emptied several times, until one by one, our bodies surrendered. Wrapped in woollen blankets or in our heavy three-quarter coats — garments that recalled, in their severe folds, the frock coats of the *Seminary of Québec* — we fell into the blessed oblivion of sleep, indifferent to the wild feasting of mosquitoes and black flies who claimed their tithe from our blood.

Above us, a gentle, flickering rain of mannes — the ephemeral mayflies — descended like a benediction. Perhaps they were not mere insects, but the transfigured souls of coureurs-de-bois, long perished in the merciless embrace of these waters, returning once more to dance above their native rivers.

Only the four passengers kept vigil, crouched by the smoky fire, seeking refuge in its ghostly arms against the tyranny of insects. In the

²² “Mangeurs-de-lard”. Hivernants were the Winterers.

Red River

end, they too withdrew into their canvas tents, and silence claimed the earth.

As for me, I lay still, my heart adrift in a tempest of emotion. The memory of Rémi's intervention, his fierce loyalty, filled my soul with an aching sweetness. He slept a little further away, under the sheltering arms of a maple tree. How I longed to slip beside him, to lose myself in his warmth ! Yet prudence anchored me to my place: to move, to speak, to reveal my yearning would have been to risk unmasking the precious secret that shielded my heart.

Thus, alone beneath the infinite vault of stars, I surrendered to the gentle agony of dreams.



The mannes, magnified 1000 times. Priv.Coll.

Chapter 10
Nights Under the Stars

In the muted vastness of our camp, only the privileged passengers were granted the meagre luxury of a canvas tent. As for us, children of toil and endurance, we made our beds beneath the overturned canoes, or else huddled under tarpaulins stretched like fragile wings between the keels when rain threatened.

Even so, no barrier could hold back the nightly siege of mosquitoes and black flies, those tireless torturers who had harried us all day and now sought, with stubborn thirst, the hidden sanctuary of our throats and temples. Entangled and dying in the thick, greasy masses of our hair, they perished inches from their prey — a useless, pitiful army sacrificed upon the altar of our human flesh.

The night spread its immense veil upon the earth. Above us, the horns of a mischievous moon traced silver daggers over the black, shimmering expanse of the *Rivière-des-Outaouais*. Somewhere in the darkness, the Bourgeois's voice rose, rough and slow, carrying fragments of a bygone world to our drowsy ears. His uncertain French, sprinkled with the accents of a distant homeland, recounted the buried memories of his Highland ancestors :

—Ah, my friends, he began, they call me a Protestant... but in truth, I am Roman Catholic, as were all my forebears. Yet ambition demanded that I swear otherwise, lest the Test Act strip me of my fortune and future. Half a century after Culloden—that cursed field where the flower of the Highlands was cut down—our people still bled beneath the heel of the invader and its “lillibulleros” that flourish all over our country.

He paused, and a voice, curious and naïve, called from the shadows :

Red River

—What is this 'lilib...' you speak of?

The Bourgeois chuckled darkly :

—Lillibullero²³... *mocking songs with which they defiled our pain, our faith, our names. Insults woven into melody, stinging more cruelly than whips.*

A heavy silence followed. Then, with a sigh heavy as the river's breath, he continued :

—*After the massacre of Culloden, the usurpers of Scotland —the lords with their stolen titles and bloodless souls— decreed that the Catholic clans must vanish. They clothed their greed in the threadbare excuse of 'economic necessity.' Cheviot sheep would fatten better on the hills than human beings. And so, with pious lies and iron laws, they scoured the glens clean of our people.*

Another voice, skeptical yet stirred, asked :

—*Economic necessity ?*

—"Aye," said the Bourgeois bitterly. *They said farming must yield to sheep-breeding. Land, once sacred to our fathers, became mere pasture. The King —that hollow idol— lent his name to this infamy. And when the people cried out, English troops descended like wolves. The Black Watch, the Royal Scots Fusiliers... regiments thick with Irishmen, themselves once rebels, now pressed into slaughtering their Celtic brothers. Thus were we set against each other, the Irish and the Scots — two broken nations, tricked into tearing each other apart while the true enemy sat aloof, counting his gold.*

²³ Mocking English songs designed to ridicule Catholic Scots and Irish.

Red River

The Bourgeois fell silent for a moment, as if reliving the funeral of a world. Then he spoke again, softer, as if to himself :

—*The eviction was simple. An agent of the local Lord, escorted by a sheriff and a Presbyterian minister, would arrive in the village. In the broken tongue of the Highlands, the sheriff would announce the Writ of Deportation. The minister, more cruel still, spoke of God's Will, proclaiming that to resist was not only rebellion, but mortal sin, damning souls to everlasting fire.*

—*And where did they send the poor souls ?* asked another, barely whispering.

—*To the coasts, replied the Bourgeois, where ships lay waiting to carry them to Canada, to Australia, to the Americas — scattered to the winds like ashes from a burnt house. And if they refused to go... He paused... The soldiers would set fire to their cottages... Old men and women, too proud to leave the graves of their ancestors, simply lay down before the smoking ruins and gave themselves back to the earth... dying among the charred remnants of their past.*

—*It's a shame,* said someone.

The old voice faltered, then broke :

—*I beg your pardon,* he muttered, struggling against the surge of ancient sorrow. *There is no shame in that.*

Thus did the night unfold, with its revelations of ruin and exile, weaving sorrow into our dreams. *Poor Celts !* I thought of the Irish refugees crowding the streets of Montréal, themselves castaways from another bitter shore, another Empire's cruelty. How many tears, how many broken songs had built the cold grandeur of the Victorian world !

Sleep descended like a dark angel. Exhaustion folded me into its embrace, and I drifted into unconsciousness, wrapped in my coarse navy

Red River

hood and rough woolen blanket. Above me, the stars burned with indifferent glory, and the river murmured the forgotten laments of vanished tribes.



Stardust.



Red River

Chapter 11 **A Simple Day's Work**

In the pearl-gray mists of morning, before even the first "bar of the day" —as we poetically named the tender glimmer of dawn— the guide's voice, hoarse with command, tore us from our dreams. It was barely three o'clock. We were summoned from the perfumed gardens of sleep back into the pitiless realm of duty.

As for me, I had just been rescued once again, for the fifth or sixth time, by the gentle arms of my beloved Rémi — an angelic apparition to whom, in secret, I gave a fervent kiss on the brow, a kiss still burning with the fever of dreams. Yet no sooner had I tasted this fleeting happiness than I had to tear myself from it, splash my face with icy handfuls drawn from the Rivière-des-Outaouais, and steel my soul against the rigors of the waking world.

On the shore, under the bruised light of false dawn, the passengers, pale and heavy-eyed, prepared themselves sluggishly for the day's work. They moved like phantoms, burdened by the leaden remnants of sleep, while we, the voyageurs, already bent under the bark of imperious orders, plunged anew into the biting river to reload the canoes, our sodden garments clinging to our limbs like cerements.

The first hours of rowing were a test of both muscle and spirit. We rowed ceaselessly for two, sometimes three hours before a meager respite was granted around six o'clock. The "brunch" — if such a name could be granted to the crude offering of cold bacon prepared the evening before — was wolfed down at the river's edge, as the morning's golden fire slowly climbed the trembling horizon.

Then came the summons to resume :

Red River

—*Alexis, row farther from the canoe, colisse ! You're going to scratch the bark !*

Thus roared Paul Mélançon, our "rudder," whose sharp eyes and sharper tongue made him tyrant of both craft and conscience. No man could shirk his labor : rowing near the hull was certainly easier, but it was a betrayal of the sacred fraternity of toil.

Every ninety minutes, or sixty if fortune smiled, the first guide raised his oar in a solemn gesture, and the convoy drifted toward the banks. There, amid the gnarled roots and tangled branches, a voyageur would leap into the water, anchoring the canoe with bare feet against the swirling riverbed. The others remained aboard, some drawing rough pipes of black petun, some chewing grimly on coarse plugs of tobacco; all rejoicing in a few precious minutes to stretch arms cramped with toil, and legs numbed by ceaseless immobility.

Nature, as ever, reminded us of our humbler demands. Some men, careless of decency, rose without ceremony to relieve themselves into the sighing breeze; only the modest Grey Nun turned her chastened gaze away. As for me, I gained a silent reputation for delicacy, stealing away from the group under a pretext, my soul rebelling against such animal indifference.

The midday meal, a jest more than a repast, was naught but a scrap of buffalo meat or a handful of wild berries, devoured hastily during another *pipée*. Hunger clung to us like a second skin, gnawing quietly at the edges of strength.

Rowing was cruel, yet paradoxically, it spared us the greater torture : stillness. To sit motionless under the blazing sun, the air humming with a thousand invisible wings, was a veritable martyrdom. Black flies and mosquitoes formed living halos around our filthy heads, their persistent attacks worsened by the crusts of seal fat we wore, into which their fragile bodies clung like unwelcome jewels. A voyageur who dared to ignore these assaults would soon pay dearly : the tiny black flies laid their

Red River

cursed eggs into any wound, and within hours, pus and larvae feasted upon our living flesh.

—*Those damn bugs !* someone would howl in despair.

— *"No use whining,* came the fatalistic reply. *It'll be worse farther up-river.*

Meanwhile, the landscape unfurled before us in all its savage, exultant beauty. Dense, primeval forests draped the low banks in emerald, only interrupted here and there by raw wounds: the logging camps. From afar, we could already hear the roaring sawmills devouring the bones of the old forests, while great rafts of pine and spruce, lashed into trembling islands, floated stoically toward distant sawmills.

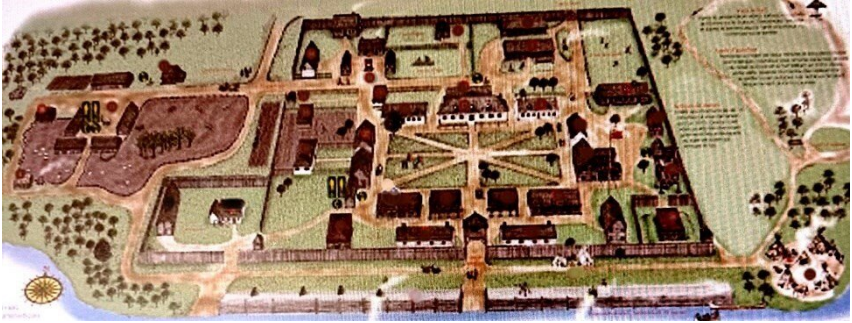
These rafts hid lurking death beneath their floating carcasses. Now and again, a rebellious trunk, freed from its brothers, would dive beneath the river's skin, surfacing like a vengeful beast. The bouts —our vigilant bow and steersmen— would shout warnings and heave their paddles against the current to veer clear of these treacherous projectiles. A collision would spell doom : a torn canoe, an icy tomb for those poor souls who, for the most part, could no more swim than they could fly.

Sometimes, to avoid certain death, the "rudder" would perform a desperate coup-de-barre, swerving violently as a renegade trunk hurtled past, drunk on liberty, reckless as a runaway colt.

Thus did the Rivière-des-Outaouais serve the twin empires of Canada : *fur* and *timber*. In winter, the French-Canadian woodsmen, buried in deep forest outposts, felled their trees amid the howls of wolves and the shrieks of the freezing wind. In spring, when the ice relented, the imprisoned logs were gathered into monstrous rafts —spanning over seven arpents, enough to form floating villages— and sent roaring toward Montréal and Québec, under the iron watch of hard-eyed river men armed with steel-tipped pikes and sapies.

Red River

And amid this raw commerce of nature and survival, we, humble voyageurs, paddled our slender craft forward, buffeted by the river's caprices, menaced by monsters both seen and unseen — and dreamed between two strokes of the oar of distant loves and lost paradises.



Fort Michillimackinac.

Sapie or Logging cant-hook for log drivers



Red River

Chapter 12 **The Log Drivers**

A few days later, we pitched our bivouac at the confluence of the Gatineau River, one of the innumerable *drave streams* that, like loyal vassals, pour their waters into the vast domain of the Rivière-des-Outaouais.

The night had barely unfurled its black banners when an inquisitive bear, troubled by the foreign scents we exhaled —scents so unlike the virginal perfumes of the wildflowers— crept into our camp. A musket shot, echoing like a cannonade across the silent forest, sent him fleeing into the deeper solitude of the woods, and left us to snatch a few more hours of weary sleep beneath the inscrutable stars.

Yet every now and then, Nature seemed unwilling to leave us in peace : a lynx with gleaming eyes, a mountain lion prowling like a specter of the underworld, a solitary elk with his slender mate, and even a caribou, regal and indifferent, glided near our fragile shelter in the trembling hours before dawn.

As the first mists rose from the river and the chill light of morning pierced our canvas of dreams, we were preparing to strike camp when a lumberjack —a man as rough-hewn as the trees he felled— emerged from the mist like a messenger of doom :

—Stay where you are, he cried. At any moment, the ice logjam upstream may break open, unleashing a furious torrent that will sweep away all in its path !

The log drivers, fevered and desperate, were laboring to free the imprisoned river. If we remained in the path of those trunks seized with

Red River

frenzy —soon to surge forth like a herd of maddened bison— we would meet a death as swift as it was merciless.

Drawn by that fatal curiosity which has so often been the ruin of the bold, I left the bivouac and followed a narrow, muddy trail winding along the tributary. There, in a tumult of crashing waters and groaning wood, I beheld the monstrous chaos : an inextricable tangle of trees, stripped of their noble crowns, wedged together by the caprices of ice and current.

On the bank, the foreman, a coarse giant with a guttural English accent, shouted over the din :

—*Who's going to blow up the key ?... A volunteer ?... One piastre!... Two !.. Three !.. Four !.. Five !.. Six piastres !...*

But the promise of gold could not tempt a soul. In the face of death, silver and copper lose their gleam. The foreman, humiliated, lashed out in rage :

—*Gangs of cowards !... Cowards all !*

The insult, hurled like a poisoned dart, was met with a thunderous chorus :

—*Go yourself, tabarnac ! If you're so brave, show us, you nincompoop !*

Yet he, who had dared to mock their fear, quailed before the trial himself. It was then that a man —a veritable Hercules in rags— seized a piece of wood and flung it at the foreman, grazing his skull, before plunging headlong into the heart of the logjam.

Armed only with a log-turner and a steel *sapie*, he fought the prison of timber like a condemned man struggling against the bars of his own cell. I watched, spellbound and horrified, as he labored alone, a fragile speck amidst the immensity of tangled trunks, and I thought :

Red River

—This man is a living sacrifice, no less expendable than the galley slaves of old, blown up with the final wedges that launched a ship into the hungry sea.

Suddenly, a cry recalled me to the world of duty :

—Our brigade is leaving ! We cannot wait !

With a heart heavy as lead, I tore my gaze from that grim spectacle and returned to the canoes, which had already begun to drift away into the widening river.

But the image of that man has never left me. I have often thought of him — and of the foreman's vile trick, that ancient ruse of challenging a man's courage to goad him into destruction. Was he carried off by the berserk stampede of trunks, crushed beneath the fury he had unleashed ? No doubt ! For in those days, a human life weighed less than a broken oar, especially when it belonged to a nameless poor. And the law, blind or bribed, held no one responsible.

Thus the river took him, as it takes all those whom greed and indifference condemn, without requiem or grave, save for the endless song of the waters.



Red River

Chapter 13 Portage Hell

Rowing from the pale glimmer of dawn to the black silence of night was already an ordeal, particularly under the infernal assaults of voracious insects. Yet I would soon learn that this trial was but a trifle compared to the true Calvary that awaited us : *the portages*.

In the harsh and uncertain life of a *coureur-de-bois*, the portage was the battlefield, the place where strength, courage, and hope itself were most mercilessly tested.

From the mouth of the Rivière-des-Outaouais to the first bends of the Mattawa River, we had to endure no fewer than eighteen portages and as many *décharges* — those violent places where the river suddenly seemed to go mad and hurled against the granite in furious cataracts. Portages soon became my most dreaded nightmare, as they were to every man who took up the paddle. Perhaps it was even this relentless martyrdom that later inspired me to become a *winterer* — one of those who settled permanently in the Pays-d'en-Haut, awaiting the day when the iron road would finally link us back to Québec.

Whenever a tumultuous rapid barred our passage, we had to unload each canoe with infinite care, stacking the sixty tons of precious merchandise along the banks like offerings to an indifferent god. Since the furious river forbade our approach to its rocky shore, we would leap waist-deep into the icy torrent, forming a human chain to pass the goods from hand to hand, while the stunned passengers stood aside in helpless silence.

We, the humble rowers, were assigned by grim necessity to this overwhelming labor. Mercifully, nature answered our need: our arms and shoulders, though bruised and battered, grew strong beneath the iron

Red River

discipline of endless toil. Yet this meager consolation did little to lighten the burden.

My companions in misfortune bore another cruel affliction — the beard. Ah! that coarse, bushy, insatiable beard, a veritable thicket where swarms of insects and hordes of parasites burrowed and feasted without pity, with a greed rivaling that of the London shareholders of the Hudson's Bay Company.

In towns and villages, a bearded man was viewed as a pariah, shunned even at the communion rail; but out here, the beard became both shield and torment. As for me, nature had spared me this ordeal: my face remained soft and hairless, like a sister's cheek. My comrades, delighted to find a subject of mockery, would jeer:

— *Alexis ! You have the cheeks of a creature !*

Or, more scornfully still :

—*Alexis, your cheeks are as soft as a nun's buttocks !*

To which I replied, laughing, as I cast an embarrassed glance toward the canoe where Sister Jeanne d'Arc sat, serene and oblivious :

—*Perhaps you know them better than I do, bro ! My grandmother had skin as soft as a novice's prayer.*

And my smooth chin, and the impudent jest, were both swallowed up in gales of laughter. Once, the lovely Sister Joan of Arc, hearing her name murmured in our ribald jokes, grew suspicious and demanded to know what was said. We answered with distracted shrugs and innocent looks, leaving her to imagine worse things than truth.

But laughter was rare amid our days of torment. Beneath the surface of forced gaiety, a dangerous aggressiveness brewed. Strained to the breaking point by fatigue and hardship, we often quarreled, sometimes

Red River

fought in sudden explosions of rage. On such occasions, black eyes, bruises, and split lips were commonplace, until, with enough wounds inflicted, wiser heads would intervene and impose an uneasy peace.

Once the merchandise was heaped like fallen warriors on the riverbank, the real suffering began. Each *colis*, each burden of 41 kilograms, had to be carried —*portagé*— overland past the roaring rapids. Some portages stretched for a few hundred meters; others, for many cruel kilometers.

When the distance was long, we paused every 500 meters to rest and re-stack the loads, retracing our steps like condemned souls in an endless penance. It could take weeks to conquer a single portage.

A leather strap, scarcely eight centimeters wide, was slung across our foreheads, the weight of the cargo crushing down on our spines. One load was the very least ; two was common ; three, a madness reserved for giants like my beloved Rémi. I can still see him, bent but unbroken, trotting under the staggering mass, his back straining but his spirit undaunted.

Passengers looked on with wide-eyed admiration. But I—I who loved him— could not admire. I could only fear, and suffer inwardly at the sight of his sacrifice.

Hernias, broken bones, heatstroke, sudden death : these were the wages of the portage. Before 1702, there had been still greater dangers : the ambushes of Iroquois warriors, incited by the fur merchants of the Thirteen Colonies. But by my time, those terrors were fading into memory. Thieves and wild beasts still roamed the woods, however, and we went armed, lest death spring out of the shadows.

Red River

Our route clung to the northern shore of the great Rivière-des-Outaouais —the future lands of Québec²⁴— skirting the ragged edges of the *Île-du-Grand-Calumet* and the *Île-des-Allumettes*. The southern channels were choked by impassable rapids and thundering falls.

Later, on the Brigade's return journey, when the river ran swift and smooth, they would sometimes dare the rapids themselves, thrilling contests of skill and courage. But for now, every step was a struggle against water, stone, and exhaustion.

The *bourgeois*, those petty overseers of our suffering, thought only of the passing time and of profit. Poor Scots, themselves colonized and crushed under London rule, they had been placed above us French-Canadians by the English lords of Hudson's Bay. Their zeal in enforcing the will of their masters was all the fiercer because they too feared the whip of dismissal. There is no overseer more cruel than a servant promoted by his master.

When a rapid could be *dared* rather than feared, we performed a *décharge*. Half the cargo was unloaded, and only the passengers remained aboard. We clung to the canoes with ropes, our legs half-submerged in icy torrents, stumbling and straining like draft animals, dragging the fragile vessels past the boiling maelstroms.

The word we used for those heavy lines —*câbles*— betrayed our ancient heritage, for we voyageurs descended from the fishermen of Normandy and Brittany, men who had bathed their tongues in the salt spray of the Atlantic. Even here, in the wildest interior of the continent, we carried with us the dream of far-off seas, and the whisper of forgotten shores.

²⁴ The southern shore will be the Province of Ontario in 1791. Englishmen who refused the independence of the Thirteen Colonies were brutalized, robbed and expelled from the United States. They fled to Canada, where French-Canadians helped them settle. But refusing French-Canadian domination, they demanded that the Province of Québec be cut in two to create an English-speaking province just for them.

Red River

Chapter 14

La Pointe-au-Baptême

One evening, as if the mighty Rivière des Outaouais, weary of its headlong course, wished to catch its breath, it widened majestically into the broad mirror of the *Lac-des-Allumettes*. There, from the tranquil bosom of the waters, rose a great island —*Île-des-Allumettes*— like a green apparition amidst the silver vastness.²⁵

It was on this virgin land that a certain Mr. Eddy, a lumber baron sprung from the restless energy of our age, had erected a colossal sawmill, one of the many buzzing hives that dotted our wild route. And, the following year, ever more enterprising, he built a factory downstream: a strange temple where, from the refuse of the pines, he fashioned tiny sticks, each bearing at its tip a magical powder that, at the caress of friction, would burst into sacred flame. Thus were produced in Canada the matches that illuminated our long winter nights.

That evening, after the oars had finally fallen silent and the red vault of the sky bled its last fires into the waters, our guide, with an air of festive solemnity, proclaimed a great event :

—Tomorrow, we shall baptize the new bacon-eaters ! We shall cross the invisible line : leaving behind the known lands of Canada to enter the mythical Pays-d'en-Haut !

And so it was. The next afternoon, the brigade arrived at *Pointe-au-Baptême*, a sacred peninsula of golden sand, delicate as powdered

²⁵ The match was invented by J. L. Chancel in 1805. J. Walker improved it 20 years later, followed by C. Sauria in 1831 and finally J. E. Lundstrom in 1855.

Red River

glass. With the gravity of monks entering a cloister, each crew drew their emptied canoes across the shore, their hands tenderly cradling the fragile hulls of bark, lighter than butterfly wings. Above our heads, a flight of wild geese sliced the burning air, their cries echoing like the trumpets of another world.

Kneeling solemnly in the fine sand, we awaited our sacred transformation. The guide, like a rustic pontiff, scooped up water from the northern river with a humble cedar bowl, and poured it reverently upon our bowed heads. Beside him, another, more mischievous, wielded a sprig of thuja as a playful aspersorium, sprinkling the neophytes with laughter and tenderness.

—*I baptize you Man-of-the-North !* they proclaimed, and the words fell upon us with the gravity of an ancient blessing.

A radiant joy bloomed in my chest, as pure and heady as the moment I had answered "*Yes, I do*" to Father Sanschagrin, pledging my life to Rémi Bernier. In that sacred instant, I was no longer a fugitive or an impostor; I was a voyager among voyageurs, a true Daughter of the North.

Then came the oaths, half sacred, half profane :

—*I pledge never to let a soul cross this line without undergoing the baptism !*

—*I pledge never to "kiss" the wife of a coureur-de-bois against her will !*

The last clause, slipped in with a mischievous twinkle, drew murmurs of laughter from the veterans.

At the signal of the Bourgeois, a salvo of musket fire ripped the air, scattering the geese into tumultuous flight. Then came the "*feast*": a glass of burning brandy pressed into each hand, paid by the Company's generous coffers.

Red River

—Now, cried the guide, *you must prove that you are men...*

A chill pierced my heart. I cast a furtive, desperate glance at Rémi. Was this the end ? Would they strip away my secret and cast me back to the ignominy of Montréal ? But no. Proving our manhood meant something far different: to conquer our terror by leaping from the summit of *Le Rocher-à-l'Oiseau*, the granite eagle's perch that marked the gateway to the Canadian Shield.

Panting, we scrambled up the rocky path, where ancient paintings of the First Peoples still clung to the stone, sacred remnants of vanished rites. From the summit, the earth seemed to drop away into the infinite : at our feet, the Deep River churned and eddied like a living abyss.

The guide spun a legend: once, a newborn, falling from this fearful height, had been plucked from death mid-flight by a passing eagle, who bore him back to the heavens.

When my turn came, I crossed myself fervently, entrusting my soul to all the saints. Then, with a desperate cry torn from the depths of my being, I hurled myself into the abyss. Mid-air, a black-backed loon darted past me in terror, mistaking my flailing arms for a snare.

Below, the river rose to meet me like an icy hand of absolution. The shock of the water snatched away my breath, but in its freezing embrace, I was reborn.

Emerging, gasping but triumphant, I heard the shouts of those less fortunate being hauled from the waters, naked and spluttering.

—*Why didn't you strip, like the others ?*

—*The slap of water is worse on bare skin than on cloth !* I lied, teeth chattering.

Red River

And none of us, not even the proudest, would ever confess the icy terror that had seized our hearts.

The rites completed, tradition demanded that the baptized cross to the southern shore, to an Algonquin village whose girls, according to the veterans, were the very embodiment of rustic Venus. Even the most pious among the voyageurs, fortified by musket smoke and rum, surged forward with a feverish gleam in their eyes.

Seeing this, Sister Jeanne d'Arc, aghast at the collective descent into Bacchanalia, buried herself in her breviary, invoking David's psalms with an ever more desperate fervor :

—Give ear to my words, O Lord ! Listen to my lamentations !

Over and over she repeated it, as if the Heavens themselves had become deaf to virtue.

As for me, I seized my musket with ostentatious zeal and volunteered to guard the canoes. A few looked at me with admiration, mistaking prudence for selfless sacrifice. One, however, shot me a suspicious glance. To avert it, I said jauntily :

—There must always be a sacrificial lamb. I'll stay this time; next time it will be your turn !

And when Rémi, my Judas, slunk away with the others, deaf to my furious, whispered warnings about damnation and divine wrath, my soul seethed with betrayal.

I swore bitter vengeance in the language of demons and wounded women. I would make him pay, I vowed, with a fury hotter than the hell-fire of Lucifer's deepest pit.

Meanwhile, Sister Jeanne d'Arc —already halfway to the celestial Jerusalem— continued to murmur into the indifference of the night :

Red River

—Give ear to my words, O Lord... Listen to my lamentations...

And neither heaven, nor Rémi, nor even the wilderness seemed inclined to listen.

Ah! Rémi! I bore him a furious grudge for many days. Yet at every portage, when I beheld him, bent like a beast of burden, struggling under three or four of my heavy 41-kilogram packs, his small, rapid steps dancing precariously over the steep, rocky trails, my resentment melted away, dissolving into the rhythm of his sweat, into the rough, heartrending cadence of his groans—*Han! Han! Han !* After a dozen such expiatory stations of the cross, I had forgiven him all... or almost all.



Red River

Chapter 15

Farewell, Canada !

The next morning, we forsook the last outposts of Canada and entered the sovereign vastness of the *Pays-d'en-Haut*.

In theory, the Hudson's Bay Company had been granted dominion only over the watersheds that flowed into Hudson Bay. But through the effrontery of the London merchants and the lethargy of Governors of Canada, the impudent Company had extended its grasp to lands whose streams paid homage to the St. Lawrence, brazenly proclaiming them part of *Rupert's Land*.

From Pointe-au-Baptême onward, the Rivière-des-Outaouais, like an impatient titan, had cleaved the ancient granite with a furious hand, carving a deep and rectilinear trench for forty kilometers—a colossal wound in the breast of the Earth, that we, humble travelers, called simply *La Rivière-Creuse*, the Deep River, from Lac-des-Allumettes to the terrible Rapide-des-Joachims.

Our days stretched endlessly, a harsh procession from dawn's first sigh to the last murmurs of dusk. We rowed like galley slaves, chained not by iron but by duty, and yet, in the rare stretches *free of portages*, an almost exultant joy buoyed us. Ah ! Happiness... that fugitive deity ! It seemed to me then that *happiness* consists not in possession, nor in pleasures, but simply in the *absence of torment*. Yet how many live and die without ever understanding it !

Above our bent backs, the heavens themselves seemed to offer a consolation, as the warblers—a thousand shimmering droplets of blue, gold, and silver—stitched the air with their songs, their colors splashing against the vault of the sky like living jewels.

Red River

We labored under the relentless command of *forty-five strokes a minute*. Often even that was not enough, as the river, in its caprice, narrowed its banks to conspire with the winds, and our helmsmen, grim-faced, demanded more.

Then the rhythmic chants rose, swelling from deep chests, drawing from the old well of French songs—songs of love, of exile, of rebellion—sometimes mischievous when no clerical ears rode with us. Singing, we forgot our chains ; singing, we reclaimed our freedom.

No man among us considered himself less than the grand Bourgeois enthroned in Montréal. Let the *Hudson's Bay Company* spin its webs of hierarchy and prejudice — we knew the truth : it was *we* who built the trade ; *we*, the sinews and breath of this country. The HBC had sought to create a hierarchy among the ethnic groups in order to better establish barriers from which the Company could profit.

I knew that the company's shareholders, managers, clerks, and even the Bourgeois could easily be replaced in their positions. We alone were capable of carrying on the fur trade without their help. I, who rowed at the bottom rung of their ladder, earned thrice the salary of a proud Montréal surgeon. The world was full of masters and servants, but among us voyageurs, the soul was its own sovereign.

And yet, for all our defiance, nature humbled us daily. The portages sapped our spirit with diabolical cruelty; the insects, mad with our blood, mounted ceaseless assaults; and the river's laughter—a mockery in rapids like *Long-Sault*, *Rapide-des-Chênes*, *Rapide-du-Lac-des-Chats*, *Chutes-Chaudières*, *Rocher-Fendu*, *Rapide-des-Joachims*, and others—echoed our sufferings like a malicious devil.

Sometimes, when the river grudgingly permitted, we reeled the canoes through with pikes and ropes, saving our bones a little, and the glass of brandy at the end of such trials tasted sweeter than ambrosia.

Red River

I learned there, amidst sweat and agony, that a woman's muscles, like her mind, grow not from ease but from the necessity to endure. Those French portage trails, now half-swallowed by forest and thorn, cut my legs to ribbons, tore at my arms and face ; mosquitoes and blackflies, like tiny vultures, plunged into my ears, my nostrils, my very soul. Harnessed by a leather strap across my bruised forehead, bent under my burden, I struggled from break to break, each step an act of war.

In the beginning, I could carry but one 41-kilo load at a time, earning the contemptuous glances of my fellows. I, last of all, would stagger ashore, while they, basking on the rocks, smoked their coarse *petun* and laughed.

Ah! But my Rémi... Rémi, repentant and watchful, helped me in secret. Perhaps it was the silent atonement for his earlier betrayal at Pointe-au-Baptême, when he had feigned deafness to my cries. I forgave him, or almost... In a discreet chamber of my memory, I tucked away the sealed record of his offense, dusty but intact, ready to be summoned forth should the years of marriage demand it.

Through his strength, he may well have saved me from what claimed others : ruptures, hernias, broken bones, and hearts stopped cold upon the trail. When death came, as it often did, we planted a rough wooden cross and a lonely oar in the soil beside the river. When the oar fell, when the name was lost, the man lived on only in the sighs of his comrades... and in the secret language of the flowers.

Should you ever pass by these rapids, traveler, lift your hat and offer a thought for these nameless builders of Canada ! From their graves, they bloom anew, woven into the buttercups, the pink hawthorns, the crimson poppies, the purple colchicums, the sky-blue forget-me-nots, the ivory lilacs. Each fragrance you breathe is their song ; each blossom, their whisper.

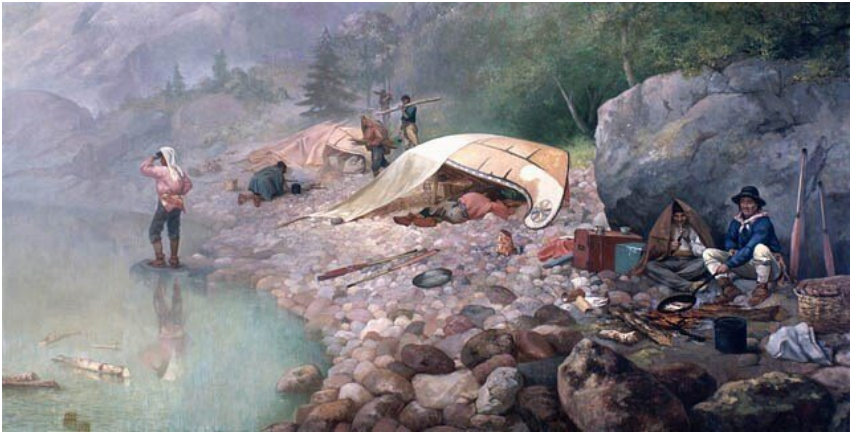
Now, as I pen these words, aged and worn by the years, my heart grieves for them — these silent, unrecorded heroes, eclipsed by the

Red River

bloated fame of speculators and merchants. And so, as I used to when I feared to cry, I sing. For a woman sings when sorrow presses her throat too tightly for tears... and cries only when happiness becomes too heavy to bear.

At the end of our 16- or even 18-hour days, the night fell upon us like a mother, spreading her vast black mantle studded with stars. It was the most splendid of all canopies, richer than any palace.

I no longer placed my dagger timidly under my pillow, but planted it upright in the earth beside my axe and musket. I even scattered powder into the basin, knowing full well it might be damp and useless — but it gave me the illusion of defense, of vigilance, in a world where fate swung on the thinnest thread.



Night camp. [Priv.Coll.]



Red River

Chapter 16 **The Manna**

I would have wished to sleep each night in my husband's arms, like Bathsheba with her King David — to lie there, upon the rough and merciless earth, cradled against his loving, protective body, hearing the slow, immense breathing that seemed to summon angels from the deep. I burned with longing to fulfill this dream, which most women, in their sad mediocrity, one day find insipid or burdensome — but which for me was a sacred anointing, an inexhaustible spring.

From the mighty *Rivière-des-Outaouais*, our course veered left, and we entered the Mattaoua River, which we ascended until we reached the sinuous *Rivière-à-la-Truite*. There, we made portage at the sullen, treacherous *Portage-de-la-Vase*, crossing the invisible frontier where the waters cease their obeisance to the *St. Lawrence River* and pledge themselves to the *Great Lakes*.

The fifty kilometers of the *Mattawa River* we devoured in two days. Youth, that prodigal magician, and the impetuous current, that secret oarsman, did most of the labor for us. Our fatigue, like mist in the morning sun, dissolved.

But the jealous rapids, those saboteurs of mortal joy, soon reasserted their tyrannical dominion : we were forced to wrestle our unwieldy *canots-de-Maistre* — behemoths weighing near 350 kilograms each — over the torn backs of the rocks, and shoulder, besides, the 4,500 kilograms of goods destined for the trade posts of the North. Altogether, our brigade bore the crushing burden of over fifty tons, like slaves in a Promethean punishment.

The black flies of the Canadian Shield, those tireless assassins of the flesh, showed themselves no less merciless than their kin of the St.

Red River

Lawrence basin. Despite our thick Scottish shirts, their stingers, more pitiless than hatpins, pierced the tartan as if it were gossamer.

As for myself, I wore beneath my clothing a rough linen camisole, tightly woven, not from modesty, but to flatten and conceal my breasts — a small bulwark against the indiscretions that could have made my journey an inferno.

To ascend the river demanded a stubborn fortitude; to descend it, a madman's dexterity and a gambler's daring. The crew's disposition within the canoe shifted according to the fury of the descent. The guide, a kind of austere priest presiding over the capricious ceremony of water and rock, searched ceaselessly for the *fil d'eau*, the precious thread of safe current, to which we had to cling as a drowning man clings to a floating spar. At such times, the furious beat of our oars slowed to fewer than thirty strokes a minute, and the guide played the metronome, like the grim chief of a galley. Sometimes he sang low, slow songs to anchor our hearts against terror.

Yet even in descent, we had to row just faster than the current, lest we surrender our steering. The "bouts," guardians of the prow and stern, hurled their orders above the river's savage roar :

—Faster, *tabarnouche*! The steering won't catch !

—Slower, you devils! We'll see hell soon enough !

—Batoche ! Keep the pace steady !

—Odilon Thivierge, lower the rhythm ! Speak from your belly ! Calm the panic! *Côôôline*! Stop your infernal babble !

We had to sing, but always in bass voices, half-drowned in the tumult of the water, the thudding of oars, and the shouts of terror from the passengers, whose paltry courage often vanished like smoke. Each of

Red River

us carried the *chienne*, that dog of *fear* gnawing at our guts, but we had to leash it, muzzle it, if we wished to remain useful.

One evening, Sister Jeanne d'Arc, who seemed to know all mysteries, told us that the soldiers of ancient Greece sang too, in deep voices, before the clash of arms — that they played their flutes to appease the dread god Pan, father of terror, who might otherwise scatter them in a storm of panic. How such a simple creature could know this, I could not tell. But listening to her in awe, my heart swelled with a pride as fierce as a river in spate : pride that I, too, was a girl, and that girls could surpass boys in courage and wisdom.

When danger grew too great, the guide would silence our eternal discussions with a single thunderous word. Our conversations, otherwise endless, were a monotonous stream, composed mostly of the voyageurs' praises for the sweethearts they had left behind. Ah ! Those mythical girls ! So beautiful, so chaste, so devout, so brave — angels, Madonnas, queens of the hearth. I would listen with a bitter modesty, certain I could never rival such paragons.

Later I learned that those same men who deified their fiancées were also the quickest to succumb to the temptations of Pointe-au-Baptême or Fort William. Shall I name names ? Eugène Levert of Trois-Rivières, Gilles Couillard (the aptly named !) of Rivière-du-Loup, Ovide Turgeon of Québec City — their shadows forgive me, for now your bones bleach on the rocks, and a rude cross of driftwood and an oar buried among the dandelions are all that remain of your tumultuous lives.

Other men spoke to themselves aloud, of their mothers, their dogs, their horses — or told blood-curdling tales of giants, heroes, and specters to make us shiver as darkness fell.

In the evenings, I always crept to Rémi's side. I slept better there. I often wondered what others thought of our odd friendship, so ambiguous, so intimate, perhaps even scandalous. Sometimes I imagined Rémi wrapping me in his arms, and under that sacred protection, my fevered

Red River

thoughts would slip into a blissful haze, while the campfires —feeble wings of flame— beat against the heavy blackness like dying butterflies.

Those flames, so delicate, so valiantly struggling against the colossal night, seemed the perfect emblem of the love that dwelled within me : a stubborn spark, a holy rebellion, defying despair even after the betrayal of Pointe-au-Baptême.

Later —when the aches and horrors of this journey would have faded into the thin mist of memory— it would be time to settle accounts.



Black fly and mosquito, the two great tormentors of the Boreal Forest.

[Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 17

At Last, the Calm of the Great Lakes

And then, one day, after weeks of infernal labors and bruised hopes, our fifteen canoes emerged at last onto that vast inland sea, the Great Lakes — and it was as if we had been cast from Hell into the gentler torments of Purgatory.

At the confluence christened *La Prairie* for its endless fields of rushes, the brigade laid down its burdens for a full day of rest. Around us, the world was draped in a silence so deep, so profound, that for an instant we believed the hardships of life had been conquered forever.

What contrast ! Everywhere, amid the tall grasses and trembling reeds, birds of a thousand dazzling hues wove their jubilant songs into a tapestry of sound and color — goldfinches, crimson finches, blue jays, green herons, indigo buntings, a living rainbow dancing before our eyes.

Above them all, an Arctic tern, clad only in the austere purity of its snowy feathers, called out with piercing insistence — "*Trieg! Trieg! Trieg!*" — as if to proclaim, "*I, too, am beautiful, though Mother Nature adorned me but in white!*"

From this enchanted cove, we now had to trace the rugged north shores of Lake Huron and Lake Superior, onward to Fort William — the gateway to the wild West. Along the starboard side, the mast and its great sail, normally furled like a slumbering serpent, were swiftly raised whenever the capricious wind favored our course, relieving our arms of their ceaseless toil.

Yet the Great Lakes, majestic and deceitful, held their own subtle perils. Mists, born of the union between southern warmth and the cool breath of the waters, drifted in silently, veiling the horizon like a sorcerer's spell. The Grey Nun, that humble fountain of knowledge, would

Red River

blush modestly as she explained these marvels of the natural world, almost apologizing for the vastness of her erudition :

—*It is the greatest reservoir of fresh water on Earth*, she whispered, as if fearful of awakening the slumbering spirits of the deep.

When the brigade leader, a man who read the heavens like a holy book, sensed the augury of storms or heavy fog, we would rise long before the trembling of dawn and set out like shadows across the water, fleeing the invisible menaces that brewed beyond the horizon.

To escape the wrath of tempests, we clung close to the stern, impassive cliffs of the northern shore, whose stony faces soared a hundred and fifty meters above our heads, offering their silent protection. Far to the south, our guide pointed out a vast green mirage floating on the water:

—*There*, he said, stretching out a calloused arm, *lies the Isle of Manitoulin, sacred to the Great Spirit. Before he shaped the Earth for men, he kept this place for himself alone, a selfish Eden beyond mortal reach.*

But in these treacherous waters, the greatest danger was not the winds or the waves, but the reckless ambition to '*take the crossings*' — to cut across the wide, exposed gulfs where the shoreline vanished into mist. There, sudden tempests would extinguish the breeze in an instant, and a silken rain would fall, innocent and deadly. Gentle as it seemed, this rain, kissing our brows like a farewell from Heaven, threatened to drown us. For our canoes, burdened with cargo, flirted always with the kiss of death : *the last drop, that would tip us into the abyss.*

And when the final tear of the clouds had fallen, the wind, refreshed and vengeful, would swell once more, filling our sail with a violent exultation that carried us onward like autumn leaves before the storm.

Thus we labored according to the secret rhythm of the lakes: embarking before dawn when the winds slept, and ceasing by early

Red River

afternoon when the gales awoke in fury. We cursed the old, capricious wind, calling it *Môôdite Vieille* — that "*damned old woman*" — for it seemed to us then that *age* was but the kingdom of treacheries and ambushes. I have since learned, by hard experience, that old age is a lesser evil compared to its dread alternative.

Yet in her rages, the Old Woman was merciless. When the skies blackened and the waves rose like charging beasts, we would lift our voices in desperate prayers to God, to the Virgin, to all the saints of Paradise — hoping that, unlike Jesus sleeping during the storm, our cries would not go unanswered.

During these battles with the elements, when no refuge could be found, we turned our canoes toward the waves at a desperate angle, 45°, to avoid being swamped. Those not rowing labored frantically with sponges to bail the water, for our wooden bowls were useless amid the tangle of bundles and cargo.

Despite all our efforts, tragedy struck. One of our *de-Maistre* canoes, battered by relentless waves, capsized. Men and cargo vanished beneath the foam; heads bobbed like broken toys in the icy churn.

—*Row for the shore, sti !* shouted the guides. *Leave the castaways ! We'll come back for them with empty canoes !*

I gripped my paddle, torn by duty and a fierce, insatiable fear — not for myself, but for him : my beloved Rémi. I knew how to swim; perhaps he did not. A mad, sweet hope flared in me : might I dive in, rescue him, cradle him in my arms as the storm raged about us ?

A desperate cry shattered my reverie:

—*Laurier Lafleur is drowning !*

—*Row, tabarnouche ! Row !* roared the guides. *We'll fetch him later !*

Red River

Listening only to the command of my heart, I cast myself into the furious waters, defying orders, risking all. I found Laurier half-drowned, his body limp between two worlds. I dragged him upwards, battling the current that tore at me with a thousand invisible hands.

But my strength, like a feeble flame, soon faltered.

It was then that Rémi —glorious, unexpected— plunged into the depths beside me. Stronger, swifter, he seized Laurier and bore us both toward the rocky haven of the shore. Ah! That moment when he pressed me against him, when our hearts beat together beneath the shattered sky ! I dare not reveal the tumult that seized my soul then. If only he had never let me go !

For weeks thereafter, my dreams were bewitched by this memory — a thousand and one nights where, beyond thorn and sorrow, I floated in his arms across seas of unspoken longing.

And yet, in my heart, doubt gnawed like a worm in the bud. Was I beautiful enough to merit his love ? At *Rivière-aux-Rats*, my mother had often told me that beauty was God's sly handmaid, luring bees to flowers, boys to girls, life to life.

—*Girls make themselves pretty*, my elder brother had teased, *so that boys, poor fools, may fall into their snares !*

Would I still be beautiful enough when we reached Red River? This thought, like a shadow with no master, tormented my every joy with its silent, gnawing anguish.



Chapter 18

Michilimackinac, Capital of the Pays-d'en-Haut

After long days of perilous navigation — our fragile skiff propelled by a removable, guyed mast trembling under the vast firmament — the shores opened, and Michilimackinac rose before our delighted eyes like an enchanted citadel sprung from the depths of the waters.

This French-speaking stronghold of the Pays-d'en-Haut, which ought to have remained a distant mirage at the mouth of Lake Michigan, had summoned us for reasons unknown, bending our course to its shores.

When the winds faltered, we would strike the mast and lash it tightly against the starboard side of the canoe, as one would sheathe a sword after battle.

At Michilimackinac converged the myriad children of the continent: Amerindians of every nation and every tongue ; cunning traders whose eyes glistened with the prospect of gain ; missionaries drunk on the divine madness of saving souls ; garrison soldiers, idle and rowdy, drowning their boredom in cheap liquor ; coureurs-de-bois ever in motion ; indomitable trappers ; fortune-hunters of the purest and most disreputable sorts ; explorers who dreamed of embracing the very edges of the world.

Around the post, nestled upon an island that from afar resembled a turtle's ancient shell, French-speaking settlers practiced a subsistence agriculture, sowing wheat, fruits, and vegetables only for their own survival, content to feed this large and chaotic family born of the wilderness.

The fort, where the cross stood beside the musket, where doctors and priests ministered side by side to body and soul, had drawn white women to its ramparts. Slowly they laid the tender foundations of a true town — the very first born in the heart of this vast, untamed continent.

Red River

By 1763, a hundred and twenty French families clung to this rocky haven, many having fled the British invasion of their native Canada. In 1812, when war stirred the lakes and forests, it was the Canadian *Corps-des-Voyageurs* who rose to defend Michilimackinac. Indomitable and insubordinate, they paraded insolently with their pipes clenched in their teeth, their daily rations of bread and pork skewered on their bayonets, and flowers thrust jauntily into the barrels of their muskets.

But when the battle cry sounded, they fought like lions to defend the last spark of their ancient world.

Beyond Michilimackinac, a few more days' sailing led us to *Sault-Sainte-Marie* and *Isle-Parisienne*, at the sacred gateway of *Lake Superior*. There, the waters stretched out to infinity, a mirror polished by the winds of heaven. Favorable breezes carried us gently along the northern shore. The old voyageurs, hardened by decades of storms and tempests, whispered in awe : never had they seen such clement weather, such radiant days.

And so we glided forward, not rowing but resting, fishing, and chatting like idle rentiers on a Mediterranean cruise. It was during one of these blissful interludes that an old guide, his face lined like a crumpled map of forgotten lands, recounted an anecdote from a previous year :

—*I was carrying a missionary nun, he began, one of the Sisters of Saint Anne of Montréal, newly founded... Brave souls, these Grey Nuns, exiling themselves willingly to savage missions, to teach the children of the wilderness to read the Word of God...*

We leaned in closer, smiling knowingly.

—...*One day, he continued, we faced a terrible rapid. Our canoe danced upon the foaming waters like a walnut shell in a boiling pot. Terror gripped us. And the poor sister, overcome, tried to stand — as if to leap onto the jagged rocks. The more I shouted, 'Sister, be still, or we are lost !' the more she flailed about, clinging from side to side. I thought all*

Red River

was lost — until I remembered what the old priests in Sorel had taught me : obedience above all. So I shouted, 'Sister, in the name of Obedience, do not move ! It was as though she had been struck by lightning. She collapsed flat in the bottom of the canoe, arms crossed, eyes wide, as if awaiting martyrdom. That's how we survived.

The tale ended in roars of laughter, and the calm of the great lake cradled us once more.

Yet even then, we knew : to sail these waters safely, the wind must be a faithful ally, pushing us gently from astern. Our canoes, with neither keel nor ballast, were at the mercy of every crosswind, every capricious gust.

The waves, when they rose, were monstrous — living mountains that had to be taken at an angle, plunging into their roaring flanks. A single moment's imbalance, a single hesitation, and the canoe would break apart like a shattered reed and disappear beneath the foam.

At last, we reached *Isle Royale*, whose shadow loomed over the bottom of Lake Superior, sealing off the mighty *Baie-du-Tonnerre*. From the Fort-William, perched under the watchful eye of Mont-Tonnerre, the lookouts spotted our approach, and the cannons thundered their salute.

All the townsfolk rushed to the dock, for our arrival marked the great event of the year — the junction of two worlds, the meeting of the *bacon-eaters* from Montréal and the *winterers* from the *Pays-d'en-Haut*.

Fort William — a great wooden bastion founded in 1803 under the name of Fort Kaministigoyeu — stood proudly at the mouth of its river. It had been born from necessity when *Grand-Portage*, our old station, fell to the Americans after the fatal cession of *French Louisiana* by a reckless Napoléon.

Here, amid the scents of pine and smoke, the pulse of trade beat strong. The Métis trappers and Indian suppliers who came down from the

Red River

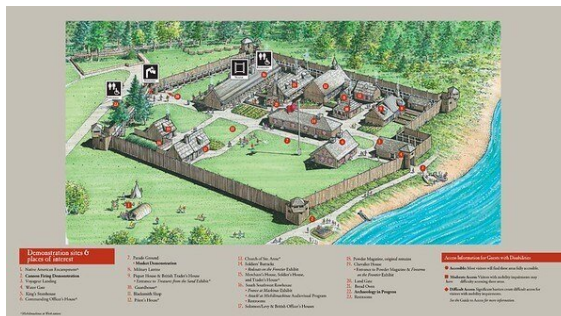
wilderness found here not the pitiless bargaining of the English Hudson's Bay Company, but the fair and brotherly commerce of the Canadian North-West Company.

But prosperity, too, has its enemies. The London government, jealous of this Canadian vitality, crushed the *Montréal North-West Company*, favoring its own languid Hudson's Bay enterprise. Once again, the humble — trappers, voyageurs, settlers — paid the price for the intrigues of distant speculators.

Thus Fort Kaministigoyeu became Fort William, named for William McGillivray, a director of the vanquished company — a small monument to a great, stolen dream.

For us coureurs-de-bois, Fort William was more than a station : it was a confluence of fates, a marketplace of destinies. Here, the great canots-de-Maitre, laden with goods and dreams, met the little canots-du-Nord, heavy with furs and memories. Each summer, we made but one such journey — for to reach the far Red River and return before the snow-bound silence of winter was a feat beyond human strength.

Thus spun the cycle of our lives : a ceaseless odyssey between two infinities, the forest and the sea.



Chapter 19

The Pleasures of Fort-William

Upon our arrival at Fort-William, a feast of gold awaited us — solid salary advances, flung at our feet like baubles before famished beasts. The British Hudson's Bay Company, shrewd as a serpent, knew well that we would squander these hard-won treasures within the very walls of their citadel, and that the fruits of our sufferings would fall, ripe and bursting, into their insatiable coffers.

The remainder of our pay was withheld, a dangling bait reserved for our return, lest the siren song of freedom and desertion tempt us to betray our masters.

Astonishment seized me at the sight of the fort — a veritable city in miniature, teeming with stores more numerous than those of any Canadian township save proud Montréal and venerable Québec. Fort-William had been erected not merely as a trading post but as a monument — a stone hymn to the former grandeur of the Northwest Company, now a ghost swallowed by its British conqueror. And yet, despite the Union Jack fluttering above its ramparts, French, sweet and defiant, was still the language that danced through its streets. Like Michilimackinac, Fort-William was a little France, adrift in the wilderness.

But soon the spectacle turned sordid. My companions, as if seeking to drown the memory of their labors, hurled themselves into drunkenness with a fury that defied reason. I, for my part, clung to vigilance, clutched it as a drowning woman clutches a spar, and fastened myself to my beloved Rémi like a second skin. His past folly at Pointe-au-Baptême, long buried under layers of forgiveness, smoldered anew in my breast, as if the very air of Fort-William rekindled old embers.

When he, exasperated, cried:

Red River

—*Alexie, you're suffocating me ! Let me breathe !*

I retorted, my voice trembling with love and dread :

—*My môôôdit Rémi ! Would you cast yourself into perdition for a glass of gin and a devil's smile ? Know you not that death lurks at every bend, and eternity yawns at our feet ? And if you died in sin, Rémi — eternal flames, Rémi! For-e-ver !*

—*Well, then," he sighed, half laughing, half desperate, "tell me, wife, what is e t e r n i t y ?*

—*It is endless, Rémi, I cried, tears misting my burning eyes, endless like my love, but without the sweetness, without the hope !*

Thus, I raved, torn between jealousy and zeal, tormenting him, I know not whether to save his soul or to chain his heart. I brandished Hell as a priest brandishes the cross against a possessed man, thinking to ward off the demons that lurked in the carnal pleasures of the fort.

It was high time to flee this Babylon, this Capu.

A farewell ball was given, its gaiety as feverish as the dying gasp of a shipwrecked man. Violins, fifes, flutes, and bagpipes entwined their complaints and their chants into a savage symphony. Lacking women, the voyageurs, undeterred, spun and leaped together in reels and square dances. At least, thought the priests, dancing among men was a lesser sin — provided no unseemly delight betrayed itself ! Alas, poor women, who in that bleak age bore the blame for every fall of man !

Providence smiled upon me : with other *bacon-eaters*, I managed to obtain passage aboard the canots-du-Nord destined for Pembina. Several of the winterers had chosen to return to Montréal, leaving us their vacant seats. Our new wages would be paid in beaver pelts — riches finer than gold in that world of rivers and forests. Michilimackinac reigned over the Great Lakes; Pembina ruled the fur-laden plains.

Red River

The hour of our deliverance rang at last. With it, tears flowed — but mine were tears of relief. My long, fevered vigilance had not been in vain : we had escaped unscathed from the snares of Fort-William.

South of the fort, under the solemn gaze of Cap-au-Tonnerre, our flotilla entered the Caministigoyeu,²⁶ whose waters unbraided themselves into three channels, weaving a green delta where the Isles Bien-venues²⁷ slumbered like leviathans at rest.

The shores were jungled in reeds and swamps; in one clearing, the cattle of the Company grazed like exiled kings. Twice a day they swam the river, obedient to some invisible command.

Three kilometers upstream, a figure in black awaited us — a priest, hand raised in benediction :

—Bonjour, voyageurs du Canada ! May God and Saint Christopher guide your way !

It was Abbot Jean-Pierre Choné²⁸, exile from Moselle, builder of the *Immaculée Conception Mission*. Around him, thirty-five houses bloomed like flowers from the wilderness — sturdy, handsome dwellings, girdled by gardens and picketed fields, a little France wrested from the primeval woods.

I was intoxicated by my new title: Winterer [Hivernante]! Yet I was but a postulant still, unbaptized into the brotherhood of the Winterers — a baptism that awaited me upon the shores of Rainy Lake.²⁹

We sailed now in canots-du-Nord, elegant and swift, seven and a half meters from prow to stern, gliding under the strokes of six tanned

26

27

28

29

Red River

arms. The proud canots-de-Maistre, with their deeper bellies, could go no farther on these shallow veins of the Earth.

The sun had tanned my face into polished leather ; my arms, corded with muscle, bore witness to the trials endured. I had learned to live as a creature of wind, water, and fire. Only in the matter of food did civilization cling to me — and here, too, I would be schooled.

Pemmican! That mythic substance, despised and dreaded by greenhorns, was to become my daily bread. Yet the cook, a master of his art, worked a miracle on that first night: seasoned with salt and pepper, the humble dish became a feast, a stew rich as any served at my grandmother's home in Trois-Pistoles.

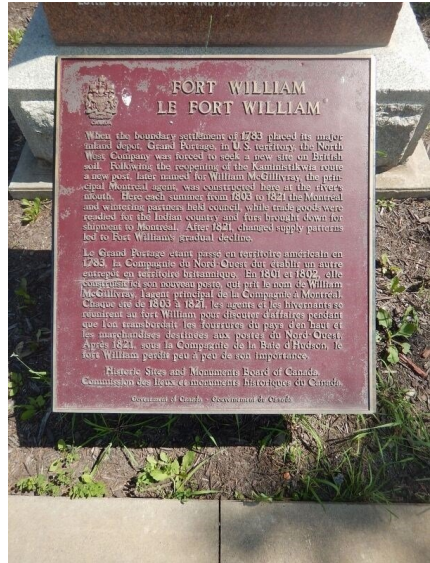
Between mouthfuls,
laughter rose like a hymn :

—*I was told it was disgusting !* cried one.

—*Well, môôdit, it's so good !*

The cook, flushed with pride, soaked in these rough praises as though they were a sacrament.

Thus, fortified in body and spirit, we plunged deeper into the wilderness, where rivers bore no names and every bend in the water held the breath of destiny.



Chapter 20

Declarations of Love to the Moon

As for my beautiful Rémi —handsome as a fallen angel, but alas, as fickle— he was the happiness of my heart, the trembling hope of all my future. I floated then on a sea of bliss, whenever resentment, like a black-winged raven, did not swoop down to smother my joy beneath its funereal wings. I had longed to flee Fort William —that Babylon of perdition— where the *coureurs-de-bois*, momentarily turned *coureurs-de-jupons*,³⁰ had squandered in a few feverish nights the fruits of so many months of hardship, offering up their wages to the insatiable Fur Company, mistress of commerce and vice alike.

From that day onward, serenity returned to me. Once again I could abandon myself to the cool benediction of the nights, to lie, trembling and wakeful, beside him when the camp had fallen into the oblivion of sleep. Long would I remain thus, wide-eyed in the maternal darkness, contemplating the black mass of his body, which radiated over me a tender warmth like that of a sheltering hearth.

—*It is so sweet... but we must not be caught !* I would murmur under my breath. *We would pay dearly !*

Often, I reflected that there was no hut so humble, no creature so wretched, that the silver moon did not gently caress with her silent beams. Taking refuge in the anonymous vastness of night, I would steal closer, breathing in his warm breath as if it were my soul's very air. Sometimes, emboldened by the starry witnesses —those diamonds scattered across the firmament, sparkling like the eyes of young lovers— I would whisper to him declarations meant more for Heaven than for his

³⁰ Untranslatable pun : a *coureur des bois* is a *forest-runner* or *voyageur*, and a *coureur de jupons*, literally a *petticoat-runner*, is a *womanizer*.

Red River

sleeping ear. In the delicious terror of discovery, I tasted the hidden joys of the forbidden.

For long hours, I murmured my vows to him, until at last the stars veiled themselves and the moon hid behind a cloud, as if modesty forbade her to spy upon my madness. Only then would I slip into the arms of sleep. Sometimes I would awaken again in the heart of the night, only to resume my dangerous prayers, my gaze lost in the dark immensity above. Ah ! what king ever slept beneath a vault as vast, as splendid as ours ? A sky of indigo, sewn with jewels ! A diadem of stars for our only crown ! Yet the dawn, pitiless, would soon creep along the river's edge, chasing away my fantasies and summoning us back to toil.

From the sails that bore us swiftly across the Great Lakes, we returned sadly to the 40 or 45 oar-strokes per minute, as we wrestled against the sluggish waters of the Kaministigoyeu, coiling through the primeval forests. Along our path, birds unfurled a hedge of honour, their melodies echoing our own rhythmic songs. Magical, fleeting memories !

But soon the carriage turned into a pumpkin : *rapids* and *décharges* roused us from our dreams. We were not princesses in vair slippers, but coarse coureurs-de-bois, beasts of burden for the Empire of fur. Freight had to be unloaded, barrels piled on bruised backs, and, with the broken cries of effort —“Han! Han! Han!”— we stumbled like wounded dancers, staggering 500 meters by 500 meters to bypass each bubbling fury.

The river, snarling like a chained mastiff, bided his time. It knew it would devour its tribute not now, but when we returned, descending its treacherous rump. Yet already it claimed its share : sometimes a voyageur, spent by toil, collapsed in agony and never rose again. Its invisible jaws licked up these offerings with a cold and savage joy.

At every tumultuous rapid, the forest bore grim witness : a hedge of broken oars and weathered crosses, grisly trophies to the river's pride :

Red River

—Behold, it seemed to roar, *the fools who dared to challenge me !*

Between *Fort William* and *Lac-la-Pluie*, thirty-five such rapids barred our way, their watery snarls demanding twenty kilometers of cruel portage. Each portage —six hundred meters of agony— branded us with its bitterness. Some rapids were so ferocious that we had to haul the canoes by ropes, like slaves dragging the chariots of tyrants.

At night, the damp chill of the forests, perhaps breathed from the immense lungs of Lake Superior, would send me shivering into Rémi's arms, seeking warmth in secret caresses, trembling that some moonbeam might betray us. As for him, he slept the profound and guiltless sleep of the just — or of the blessed renegade.

The exhaustion gnawed at our souls. Tempers frayed. Over the smallest slight, quarrels erupted among the men like brushfires. For my part, I was cautious, swallowing my pride so as not to provoke a dispute that would drag Rémi, all too ready to defend me, into the fray.

The oarsmen showed me no unkindness. Perhaps because, forced to carry only one or two packs at a time, I unwittingly gave them brief moments of rest they otherwise would not have dared to take. Thus, the bourgeois scowled at me, fretting over lost time, while the voyageurs smiled, blessing me in silence.

At the head of a small portage, not far from a modest waterfall near the *Rivière-de-la-Prairie*, the greediest among us gorged on the blueberries that clothed the hillocks in deep blue velvet. But nature's gifts had their price : the next day, many an unfortunate *foufoune*³¹ paraded shamelessly, for the violent purges knew no decorum. Even the fish, I daresay, have not forgotten that day of scandal and feasting !

³¹ Foufoune = the behind.

Red River

At *Portage-du-Milieu*, we crossed the great *Continental Divide*. The guide raised his hand as a shrike whistled overhead :

—Here, he cried, the waters fates ! To the east, the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River; to the north, the frozen deserts of Hudson's Bay; and to the south, the mighty Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico.

Beyond this threshold, we would suffer less fatigue, but face greater dangers.

The nights grew deeper, scented with the heavy musk of *Labrador tea*³² and guarded by the strange, pale flowers of the Pink Lady's Sleeper Orchid³³ — lovely, deadly, and carnivorous. That night all slept dreamlessly — save for me. For me, the night was a garden of whispers and kisses, as I breathed into Rémi's sleeping lips words of foolish hope : that he would love me forever, that he would remain mine alone. Vain illusions !

Suddenly, oars splashed in the darkness. Across the shimmering mirror of the river glided three long, ghostly canoes, their crews whispering in an unknown tongue. I froze. Were they thieves ? Marauders ?

A sleeper coughed, and one of the phantom canoes shuddered, almost capsizing in fright. Then silence fell again, and they melted into the night.

But not for long. Three more canoes crept out of the gloom, drawing up before our stockpiles. My heart hammering, I slipped from my blanket and roused our “*avant*”:

—*There are thieves, stealing our goods !*

³² Thé du Labrador or *Rhododendron groenlandicum*.

³³ *Cypripedium acaule* : Sabot-de-la-Vierge : or. Les Indiens utilisaient des infusions de ses racines pour traiter les affections rénales et les maux d'estomac.

Red River

He leapt to his feet, musket in hand, lit the wick from an ember, and fired into the night. The blast shattered the silence, awakening the entire brigade amid a chorus of oaths and tumult. The thieves, terrified, hurled themselves into their canoes and fled.

—*They've taken two packs !* cried a voyageur.

I, together with two or three armed men, gave chase along the shore, shouting threats.

—*Drop the packs or you're dead !* I cried in French.

I tried to fire, but my powder had fallen in the stampede. Grabbing my neighbor's arm, I implored him to fire. His musket thundered, and at once, a thief's broken French pierced the night :

—*Voilà !... Voilà vos paquets ! Ne shoutez pas ! Hell !*

The two stolen bundles, wrapped in oilcloth, splashed into the water, and a voyageur plunged in to retrieve them. The marauders vanished, and the river swallowed their shadows.

But sleep, once frightened away, refused to return. Even the moon veiled her face behind a cloud, as if she, too, wearied of the night's alarms, and longed, like us, for a forgotten peace.



Chapter 21

The Baptism of *Rainy Lake*

At last, we reached Lac-à-la-Pluie — the fabled Rainy Lake — a boundless mirror of sky and forest, stretching its solemn immensity over seventy-five kilometers of shifting horizons, nearly as wide as it was long. Four hundred and forty-five kilometers separated it from the cold majesty of Lake Superior by canoe and portage. Its shores, sometimes humble and marshy, sometimes austere and rocky, rose here and there into proud cliffs, ablaze at dawn with a furnace of light a hundred or even a hundred and fifty meters high — titanic ramparts sculpted by the patient centuries.

Amid this vast expanse, a multitude of five hundred islands floated like emerald phantoms, cloaked in the heavy drapery of ancient forests. It was a labyrinth fashioned by capricious gods, a maze to bewilder the uninitiated, where the timid voyageur could lose both hope and compass.

Around mid-afternoon, a squall rose from the south, lashing the crystalline waters into a frenzy of perilous crests. For a moment, it seemed the lake would devour us whole. But the tempest, as suddenly as it had burst forth, sank back into slumber, like a beast sated with its own fury, leaving only the trembling lake and the scent of fresh rain in its wake.

As foretold by the wise tongues at Fort William, I had come to undergo a second baptism — this time, as an *Hivernant*, a Winterer of the Great North. To mark the occasion, I chose a lonely tree upon a small hillock, commanding the lake's infinite melancholy. My companions, agile as squirrels, climbed the rugged trunk and lopped away every branch save the crowning tuft.

Red River

Thus, the tree became a totem, taller than the tallest mast, its rough bark soon bearing the rustic incision : **ALEXIE**.

A learned companion, peering with mock severity, noted the final letter was misshapen, that my "S" betrayed the timidity of an "E."

—*If you see an 'E',* I retorted with roguish gravity, *it is your throat that is dry, not my hand that has faltered. Come, a glass of brandy will cure your vision error!*

The proposal was hailed with joyous clamor; the error was drowned in laughter and liquor. My own cup joined the libations offered by the *Hudson's Bay Company*. Others among the newly baptized, emboldened by the revelry, clamored to offer rounds themselves, but the Bourgeois, ever the cautious shepherd, forbade further folly lest an accident mar the voyage.

Before departing, I caressed my totem — my rough monument to a fleeting glory — and whispered a hope that, one day, a mischievous gust would make my humble totem lean into that of my beloved Rémi, like two lovers brushing hands in secret.

—*Hip ! Hip ! Hip !* cried the guide.

—*Hurrah !* we answered, tearing the sacred stillness with our musket fire and roaring cheers. For a moment, the birds fell silent, startled. A few rose in frightened whorls of feathers, thinking some ancient war had awoken. I, for my part, was drunk with pride : I was no longer a novice; I was a Veteran of the North.

We descended into the sinuous arms of the *Rivière-la-Pluie* — the *Rainy River* — around the hour when the day's fierce heat begins to yield to evening's first caress. The very air was perfumed with the sweet balsam of poplars, as if the Earth herself were breathing in peace.

Red River

The river, a silver ribbon 120 kilometers long, meandered with the grace of an idle dream. Near its mouth, *Fort-Frances* stood sentinel atop an eminence, its wooden walls gazing peacefully over cultivated fields of wheat, potatoes, turnips, and carrots — a tiny *Garden of Eden* wrested from the wild.

Along the banks bloomed a riot of *wild roses*, *honeysuckles*, tangled *convolvulus*, and towering *Jerusalem artichokes*, their gold and violet faces nodding proudly among groves of ancient *elm*, *fir*, and *oak*. Everywhere the *Goldenrod* blazed, gilding the shores with its brazen fire, while my comrades made jest after jest at its medicinal reputation, finding in it a thousand bawdy uses for the ailments of the flesh.³⁴

At night, lying beside Rémi beneath the cathedral of stars, I would take his hand and, together, we would drift — silent mariners upon that celestial sea. We wandered through gulfs of night, through necklaces of constellations and frothing silver nebulae, vagabonds adrift amid the splendors of a forgotten Eden. We were alone — more alone than Adam and Eve — lost thieves amid a useless wealth.

Yet just when my soul was about to drown in this divine intoxication, an accursed memory from Pointe-au-Baptême would rise like a snake to poison me anew: “*Patatras!*”

Anger seized me — foolish, childish, vengeful — and my dreams turned to ashes. I clenched my fists in the dark, swearing that Rémi would one day pay for his treachery. Thus, did rage, not fatigue, keep me awake until dawn’s grey fingers parted the forest canopy.

The *Rivière-la-Pluie* — ah, what words could ever paint her perfection! Even the skeletons of old Indian camps, their tipi poles now bare, were wreathed with blooming honeysuckle and crowned by convolvulus in purple triumph.

³⁴ In French Golden rod is called : La Verge d’Or. This explains the questionable jokes.

Red River

But beauty, like all earthly joys, is never immune to interruption. Suddenly, a thunderous roar filled the air: a waterfall—a wild plunge of seven meters !— where the river threw itself, reckless and laughing, into the abyss at the *Rapide-du-Manitou*.

There, the serene maiden became a galloping colt, eager to squander its youth in riotous abandon before vanishing forever into the silvery immensity of the *Lac-des-Bois*, the *Lake of the Woods*.



Manitou Rapids [Priv.Coll.]



Chapter 22
The *Liquid Nebula* : Lac-des-Bois

Lake of the Woods unfolded before us like a liquid nebula, a shimmering infinity where earth and sky dissolved into water. A vast labyrinth of silver, one hundred kilometers wide, spangled with 14,542 islands — so many that even King Minos, in the heart of his Cretan palace, could not have imagined a maze more bewildering or cruel to the uninitiated. Without an infallible guide, one could vanish forever in this floating forest, where each horizon dissolved into mirage and mist.

Our Grey Nun, whose tireless knowledge was like a sacred fire that never flickered, taught us that these waters once slumbered at the bottom of the ancient glacial Lake Agassiz, a titan among lakes, born of the earth's last sighs at the end of the Ice Age.

Here, heat and light intertwined so tightly that the very air trembled, birthing prodigious mirages where humble rocks rose as towering promontories, and the simplest of shores unfurled like enchanted cliffs. This world of illusions — sublime, tangled, delirious — dazzled me with its dangerous seduction, a beauty so profound that it bewildered the soul.

Led with unerring instinct, our guide threaded his way through this ocean of islands to the hidden northern shore. There, beneath a tangle of trees adorned with cascades of white honeysuckle, slumbered the mouth of the *Winnipeg River* — our next ordeal. Its waters sprang forth at the furious *Portage-du-Rat*, churning and frothing, and raced for 225 tormented kilometers. When our guide revealed the monstrous length of this passage, my heart shrank within me; Pembina, our fabled destination, seemed to recede like a mirage, ever farther, ever more unattainable.

The Winnipeg River did not welcome us ; it raged against us. Its cataracts —furious, magnificent— hurled themselves in cascades,

Red River

among which one, proud and terrible, plunged 104 meters in a single sublime somersault. How could we not marvel at such sublime spectacles ? Yet the banks of these enchanted waters were littered with the tragic crosses of lost voyageurs. Each eddy, each silvery waterfall whispered the same dreadful warning :

—Beware, coureurs-de-bois ! Here beauty is a trap, and harmony is death in disguise !

Yet life persisted amidst the river's wrath. The Winnipeg teemed with sturgeon, with fierce pike and gleaming perch, with carp heavy with flesh. Many a night our huntsmen, armed with spears and nets, saved us from the eternal monotony of bland pemmican with these fish, whose delicate flesh tasted of wild water and sunlit reeds.

From *Lac-la-Pluie* to *Bas-de-la-Rivière* — where the Winnipeg River sighs into the great body of Lake Winnipeg — we endured twenty-six portages and three *décharges*. Six cruel kilometers of burden, where each step tore the sinews, and each stone underfoot conspired to make us fall. Ten days we battled thus, against river and rock, against time and fatigue, as if wrestling invisible demons.

There was no respite. The rapids came at us like battalions, tireless and merciless. Each was different, yet all were deadly. In their monotonous succession, they seemed to mock us : routine belonged only to death, not to struggle. Many times a day, we felt death brushing against us — laughing, leering, as it played its wicked dice with our fragile canoes.

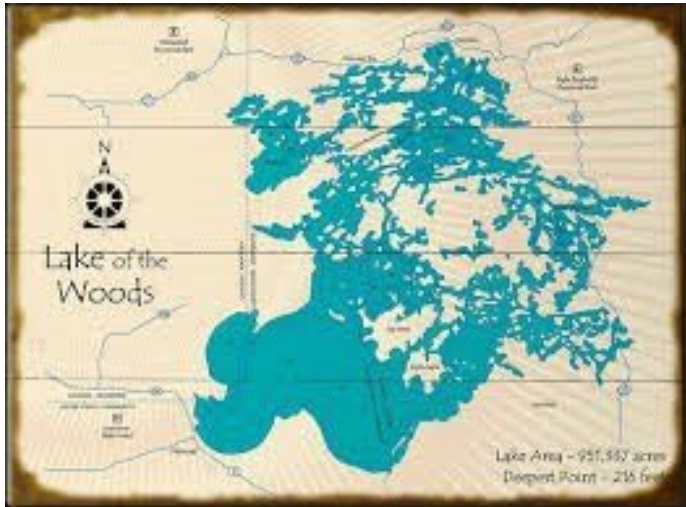
When youth shields the heart, one believes oneself immortal ; but when companions fall, that shield shatters. I now understand the terror of soldiers advancing under enemy fire, hearing the fatal whine of projectiles and watching the living ranks dissolve around them. "*Close ranks!*" the officers cry. "*Close ranks !* We too, fur soldiers of the great Companies, fighting not for glory but to enrich distant shareholders,

Red River

faced our invisible fusillade: black crystalline snags, sudden white-capped mouths eager to swallow us whole.

These reefs, treacherous and hidden, lunged at our canoes, seeking to rip them open and expose us to the devouring currents. How many times did I see the jaws of death gape just a handbreadth from my paddle ? How many times did my heart stop with terror, only to beat again in desperate defiance ?

Never — never — would I again trust my fate to those treacherous rivers. I swore then that I would never return from Red River until the day when the steel rail, that iron artery of civilization, would replace these perilous canoe routes. Only then, I thought, would death cease to lay ambush for the voyageurs at every bend of the river.



Red River

Chapter 23 **The Fatal Day**

The weather was so resplendent, so triumphantly serene, that not even the faintest shadow of misfortune seemed possible on the blue horizon of my hopes. One after another, we attacked the twenty-nine most perilous rapids with a bravery born more of exhaustion than of courage.

Some rapids we crossed by partial *discharge* ; a few 41-kg packs bruised the shoulders of the men along the slippery portage trails. Others we conquered by dragging our canoes, bent double along the banks, roping them *à-la-cordelle* like oxen at the yoke.

As for the most savage ones —the death-traps where the bones of old voyageurs formed a double hedge of ghosts along the banks— they were entirely portaged.

Thus far, Providence had been kind. Only minor incidents troubled us : a little water to sponge out, bark scratched and hastily blinded with caulker's gum. Nothing more. We began to believe we might escape the day with our lives and our illusions intact.

And then came *the twenty-sixth rapid*.

It should have been portaged, as reason demanded. But we were battered, broken, disgusted to the core by these endless trials that bent the neck and corroded the soul. Voices, weary of discipline, rose from the canoes :

—*Jump it ! Let's jump it ! On le saute !*

Red River

Weakness or madness — what does it matter ? The chief guide and the bourgeois, despite their lesser burdens, allowed themselves to be persuaded. We would tempt Fate once more, riding the savage flood.

Ah, God! It was to be the most terrible descent of the entire expedition.

Our "devant —the bowman, master of our fate— miscalculated. The canoe grazed a submerged rock, sending a jolt through the fragile birch hull. Water trickled in, but lightly ; had we held our nerve, we might still have survived. Yet, jostled by the impact, the bowman dropped his short oar, the instrument of all hope. In a paroxysm of panic, he leapt from the canoe onto the nearest rock, abandoning his post —and us— to the fury of the river.

The crew, stunned by this betrayal, faltered. Rage and horror erupted from the boiling foam. Paul Mélançon, our helmsman —newly crowned, like me, Hivernant— was seized by the contagion of terror and fled in turn. Then others, like rats deserting a sinking ship, leapt onto the cruel stones, the bourgeois himself among them.

But two souls remained steadfast: my Rémi, my beloved, and Adrien Lafleur, his brave companion. Without a thought for themselves, they rushed to the bow and stern, oars in hand, to try and save the canoe laden with its precious cargo. Perhaps they did not even realize they were sacrificing themselves; or if they did, they embraced it with the serene ignorance of true heroism.

I, too, leapt, desperately hurling myself onto a black rock that gashed my hands and feet through the torn leather of my moccasins. I turned back just in time to see the canoe, abandoned by all but two, spinning madly in the rapids, whirling like a maple seed in a storm.

Through the spray and the roar, I screamed :

—*Réééemiiiiii Berniiiierrrr... juuuuuuuump !*

Red River

But they would not. Their hands clung to the canoe, whose prow still bore the painted heads of Indians crowned with eagle feathers, as if those dying faces could lend them courage. My voice tore itself to shreds against the roar of the rapids, but Rémi, like a cowboy clinging to a wild mustang, refused to abandon his post.

And then — then the river opened its monstrous jaws.

A wave, black and cruel, swallowed them. I saw an arm — Rémi's arm— thrust once from the shimmering whirlpools, then disappear into the maw of the abyss.

Blinded by tears, blood running down my shredded hands, I ran along the bank, calling out his name. I called and called, like a soul wandering the Underworld, but the river only laughed at my despair, tossing back my cries like dry leaves.

Further down, the waters calmed. The demon, sated, lapsed into a sinister peace.

I reached the end of the rapid. Oh, if only the canoe could emerge as well — battered, but afloat ! But it was not to be. I saw, in the distance, a splintered hull and scattered cargo bobbing like corpses on the foam.

And then — Adrien! Adrien's body, limp and bleeding, floating into a shallow cove.

I plunged into the freezing ripples and dragged him ashore. His skull was horribly shattered, his forehead a red ruin. He coughed blood and vomited, a ghastly mixture of life's last rebellion.

—*You're safe now, Adrien*, I lied, wiping his bloodied mouth with my torn hands. *The Sister will take care of you. Sleep. Sleep and rest !*

But deep in my soul, I knew the truth : death was already whispering in his ear.

Red River

The others soon arrived, faces grim, eyes lowered. Adrien was placed tenderly in the Grey Nun's care. I ran again along the shore like a madwoman, searching, shouting, cursing the heavens — but my Rémi was gone.

Gone !

We searched all evening, to no avail. When night fell, we camped on that mournful shore. I was beyond weeping; my eyes were dry, my soul a raw wound. I fashioned two simple crosses from birch branches. On Adrien's fresh grave I planted the scorched oars, engraved with their names :

—Rémi Bernier, Cap-Saint-Ignace... Adrien Lafleur, Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière.

Oh, had I been able, I would have buried myself beside them !

The Bourgeois was inconsolable — but not for the reasons of the heart. He lamented bitterly the loss of his precious top hat, the shining symbol of the bourgeoisie he so craved. Stripped of his finery, he was merely a poor man once again. Furious, he punished the faithless helmsman, stripping him off his guide's salary.

I feared he would recall the day I had mocked him, forcing him into the river to bathe. Now that Rémi was no longer there to soften his pride with laughter, I trembled for the future.

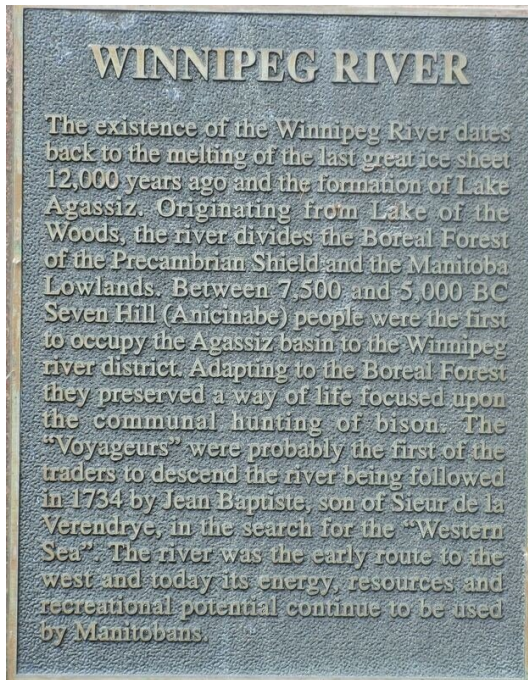
A long prayer was chanted over the twin tombs, rising like incense into the blood-red dusk. I tried to join, but my voice broke into sobs that convulsed my whole body. People stared at me, but I no longer cared. Some men come and go in our lives, leaving only a breeze of memory. Others leave scars that burn until the day we die. Rémi was one of these.

Red River

A raft was assembled from rough logs, a pitiful effort to salvage what remained of the drowned canoe's cargo. We recovered a few soaked bales, a barrel of powder, some limp cloth, a few rusted tools. Of the poor piglet we had carried with such care — nothing but a floating wooden cage.

The last stretch to *Bas-de-la-Rivière*, at the mouth of *Lake Winnipeg*, passed swiftly. I felt nothing. The world was empty, an immense and indifferent desert.

In this savage West, I knew, only one cure existed for grief so immense : Time. Time, and the slow, bitter alchemy of learning to laugh at one's own agony, lest it consume us whole.



Red River

Chapter 24 **Finally, Red River !**

Lake Winnipeg, immense and melancholy, lay nine hundred and thirty kilometers from the crystal shores of Lake Superior, following the tortuous and shimmering trail carved by our canoes. At Bas-de-la-Rivière, like a family separating at a crossroads, our brigade splintered: some canoes and the raft pushed northward to deliver barter goods to the distant outposts of Lake Winnipeg, the Saskatchewan, and the Assiniboine Rivers, threading the shortcut of *Portage-la-Prairie*. Others, lighter and more nimble, turned toward the lonely stations of the *Petit-Nord*: the barren shores of Hudson's Bay, James Bay, and the wind-beaten coasts of northern Lake Superior.

Before us opened the *Baie-de-la-Traverse* — a watery gulf we must dare to cross to reach the sacred mouth of the Red River. That evening, our brigade encamped on the southern shore of Lake Winnipeg, where beaches stretched wide and pale, their sand as white and fine as the talcum breath of angels.

In the shadowy secrecy of the night, I wept — wept without sound, without tears, as one weeps when the soul itself dissolves in sorrow. Even the compassionate moon, moved to tenderness, veiled her face behind a bank of dark clouds, refusing to intrude upon my grief.

The entrance to the Red River, we were told, was treacherous this year. The rains had swollen its banks and flooded its mouth into a vast, trembling swamp. On either side of the slow river, dense curtains of forest unfurled, green and humid, as though the land itself recoiled from the caress of man. Around every bend, half-concealed among the trees, appeared the humble, proud dwellings of the French Métis — brave children of the *Rivière Rouge* — whose homes followed one another like beads on a rosary, all the way to La Fourche, where the mighty

Red River

Fort Garry, the "*Fort-d'en-Haut*," kept solemn watch over the meeting of the waters.

At each hourly rest, I climbed the high, crumbling banks to gaze beyond the trembling veil of forest at the "*Prairie-planche*," that endless, level plain where the sky itself seemed to stoop to kiss the earth. The horizon, a ring of misty blue, knew no hills, no ridges, no boundaries save the slow, imperceptible swell of grass and wind. Only here and there, a solitary grove of willows or poplars marked a pulse in this sleeping ocean of green.

Sometimes, as if conjured by some enchantment, Métis carts would appear, creaking along hidden trails. Their Red River carts — all wood, untouched by iron — sang in discordant melodies as they moved, echoing across the endless plain.

The Métis men wore moosehide trousers richly embroidered with tiny shells and beads — blossoms, stars, fleurs-de-lis, stitched in a riot of colors across the supple leather. Their women, radiant in vivid cottons, adorned themselves with painted shell jewelry and soft moccasins trimmed with raised seams of embroidered hide.

I found them beautiful, these daughters of the Prairie : full of life, proud of their blood, half wild, half courtly. Yet among them, too, I saw women past the first bloom of youth, draped in colored shawls, as though they wore the years upon their shoulders like a visible mourning for vanished springtimes.

At La Fourche, the Assiniboine River came with joyous tumult to join the eternal dance of waters. There, huddled around a vast, fearless church — able to cradle five hundred souls within its stone arms — stood a cluster of stout stone houses, each a testament to the endurance of a people who had wrestled existence from the earth. A walled cemetery, grey and pensive, guarded the slumber of their dead. Not far away rose the priest's modest rectory, and beyond it, the schoolhouse, where new

Red River

generations learned to sing the old songs of France in a land that scarcely knew her name.

Here, at La Fourche, many of our companions ended their journey. But for me, the path stretched onward, southward, to Pembina, a forlorn village at the mouth of the river that bears its name — a place, through the tangled accidents of History, that had belonged to the United States for near thirty years.

We reached it the next day, after four long, soul-wearying months of exile from Montréal. Yet no joy crowned my arrival : Rémi, my handsome Rémi, was gone, and with him, all the shining scaffolds of my dreams had collapsed into dust. His name pulled at my heart like a dissonant chord, a sharp and painful music I could not silence. I knew I must tame this despair if I wished to survive in this strange country. It was not yet time to surrender to the sweet poison of sorrow. I needed all my strength, all my stubborn hope — unless I should choose, at the melting of the snows, next spring, to return home...

—*Good luck, Alexis*, murmured the Bourgeois, his voice thick with emotion, as we parted. *And may God keep you safe.*

—*Good luck, Bourgeois ! Good luck, all of you !* I called back, waving my cap high over my head. *We shall meet again, somewhere, someday, at the bend of a river !*



Chapter 25

Pembina, Capital of the French Métis of the West

Pembina ! The very name rose before me like a mirage long conjured in my dreams during the endless voyage — those days when, lulled by the rhythmic splash of oars, we gave ourselves permission to imagine thrilling adventures, eternal loves, and radiant futures; those evenings when, seated around the fire, we traded tales of perils conquered and castles built in the thin air of hope. Now, at last, it stood there: the legendary city, nestled on the left bank of the capricious Red River, four kilometers shy of the American frontier.

A profound relief ought to have flooded my soul at the end of my harrowing ordeal. But the cruel hand of fate had shattered that expected joy. Rémi, my beloved, my life's architect with whom I had raised in my heart a thousand palaces of air, in Spain and here at Red River, had fallen before reaching this Promised Land. He would never see Pembina.

And so, the sweet counsel of my dear mother —*Forget what is no more, your failures and your sorrows. It is simple wisdom ! As for good memories, cherish them without mourning !*— seemed to me, on this occasion, an impiety. I would not betray my grief to save myself from the pain that gnawed my heart; I would not forget him, even to live. His absence was still a fresh wound, a blade lodged deep within me, too new, too sacred to even wish to heal.

Above me, the wind, that eternal artist of the firmament, caressed the dazzling clouds, shaping and reshaping their fleeting forms with the warmth of a grieving hand seeking beauty in transience.

The name *Pembina*, I learned, was but a tender corruption of *pain béni* —blessed bread— whispered by the tongues of voyageurs. It spoke of the *three-lobed viburnum*, whose humble fruits flavored the

Red River

harsh pemmican that sustained the men of the West — that rude, blessed sustenance of an untamed land.

I was lodged in one of the houses reserved for the Company's servants — a simple dwelling, shared by French-Canadian *coureurs-de-bois* with their Indian wives and dusky children, and by Métis families whose hearts burned with a fierce fraternity. Their warm welcome should have consoled me.

Yet an unease clung to my spirit. I lived under constant fear of betraying myself, for I still refused to surrender the male garb that had once been my shield against *peri*. But it had now become a habit engraved into my very being. What had been born of necessity had grown into second nature — and yet, I trembled at the thought of offending those who would not forgive such an audacious masquerade.

Despite all, I lived a secret triumph that millions of my sisters only dared to dream: I had tasted, and continued to taste, the heady liberty of the sons of the forest.

With a bittersweet pride, I received the fruit of my labor. The Company's clerk, stern but not unkind, announced :

—You are entitled to two hundred and fifty-three pelues, not counting the merchandise premium.

Thus I entered the strange economy of the wilderness, where a man's worth, a woman's daring, was measured not in gold nor silver, but in *pelts* — the soft fur of the beaver, the true coin of the realm. In this remote Eden, all currencies — the Spanish *pieces of eight*,³⁵ the English pounds and shillings, the American dollars, and the old *French livres* — had melted into the primal wealth of the land itself.

³⁵ *Pièce de huit* or *real de a ocho* or *peso de ocho*.

Red River

The *British Hudson's Bay Company*, cunning as the serpent in Genesis, had begun in 1835 to mint its own coin, not to enrich the people, but to bind them more tightly to its grasp. Yet the stubborn *pelue* [or pelt] remained the standard : a shirt demanded twelve pelts, a yard of cloth three, a handful of sugar half a pelt.

The Company, untroubled by conscience, set the prices as it pleased, and imprisoned the trappers behind invisible walls of monopoly. If a voyageur dared to sell his furs abroad — to the Canadian markets or across the American line — he risked ruinous taxes or imprisonment.

Beneath this tyranny, discontent simmered like a hidden fire. The Métis, proud heirs of two worlds, felt the lash of injustice most keenly. They suffered the intrusion of armed constables who burst into their homes without warning, searching for forbidden hides, trampling the sacred threshold between the hearth and the law. The indignity bit deep.

One evening, around a campfire perfumed by the pine-sweet smoke, a *hivernant* spoke with the slow fury of the oppressed :

—*The Company is master and tyrant here. They buy the furs from us Métis at a mere pittance — twenty shillings sterling — while they rob the Indians, offering but a single shilling. And if we trade justly among ourselves, they call it 'fraud' and send their constables to crush us.*

Another added :

—*They did the same in Canada ! My father in Chicoutimi told me how the Company swindled the Tadoussac Indians.*

Yet another, fists clenched :

—*They are but thieves ! And worse : they were granted monopolies on the promise to settle the land with good men, but instead they kept it barren, fearing competition would force them to pay us fair prices !*

Red River

—All to enrich a handful of idle lords and arrogant aristocrats in distant London !

Thus, the Métis, slow to anger but mighty in indignation, bided their time. The day would come when they would no longer bow to the foreign hand that claimed dominion over their rivers, their forests, their very freedom.



In September 1812, a group of settlers recruited by Lord Selkirk (British Hudson Bay Company) to establish a colony near the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers continued south along the Red River to its junction with the Pembina River, where they wanted to compete with and then neutralize the Canadian North West Company already established there. On the north bank of the Pembina stood Fort Pembina, a fur trading facility of the Canadian North West Company. The British Hudson Bay Company (Lord Selkirk) occupied the south bank of the Pembina River and there set up Fort Daer in honour of the eldest son of Lord Selkirk. But in 1818 a treaty between the United States and London concluded that the border between Canada and the US lay along the 49th line of latitude, putting Fort Pembina and Fort Daer in American territory. Fort Daer was abandoned. In 1821, at the request of the HBC, the English Government forced the NWC to be absorbed into the HBC, under various false pretexts. [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

In those days, barter among the Indians had been a sacred act, a gift given and received with *honor*, as Samuel de Champlain himself had once understood : *fur was not sold, but bestowed, and the return gift was a testament to mutual esteem*. But the English merchants had corrupted this noble code, replacing it with the cold greed of commerce — a system that valued nothing but *profit*, and sought always to sell the meanest trinket at the dearest price.

And so, in Pembina, beneath the shifting clouds and the restless wind, the seeds of rebellion were being sown — seeds nourished by injustice, and destined one day to break through the hard soil of oppression in a furious flowering of freedom.



Map of the Métis parish of Lorette in Manitoba, based on the cadastral model of the seigneuries of New France. Each lot has access to the river. [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 26 The Fantastic Rides

At last, as the clerk at Pembina placed in my hand the final balance of the wages so cruelly withheld at Fort William, I found myself, for the first time in my life, rich. After selling the pelts granted to me as bounty, my modest fortune swelled to nearly 350 pelues — a king's ransom for one who had so often dined with hunger.

While most voyageurs had squandered their pay amid the unquenched pleasures of Fort William, I, cold to their coarse amusements — so much so that they nicknamed me *casseux-de-veillées*³⁶ at Rivière-aux-Rats — had preserved my little treasure like a miser hoarding the last sparks of a fading fire. Thus I could afford a *hunting horse* for fifteen pounds sterling, and, for five paltry *piastres*, a sturdy *cayuse*³⁷, that humble beast born of native and Spanish blood. I even dreamed, half incredulous, of buying a Red River cart to crown my new independence.

It was then that Father Belcourt³⁸ — the soul of Pembina, and its firm yet tender conscience — crossed my path. Newly settled since 1848, he had already blessed the land with a wheat mill at Saint-Joseph, seeking not wealth but service to his flock of scattered Métis.

—*Instead of buying a cart*, he counseled me, with that serene authority which commands obedience without wounding pride, *build it yourself, with the help of a master craftsman. Thus no intermediary will devour your hard-won earnings.*

³⁶ Casseux-de-veillées = Party pooper or partycrasher.

³⁷ Cayousse.

³⁸ Georges-Antoine Belcourt or Bellecourts, born in 1803 at Saint-Antoine-de-la-Baie-du-Febvre (Baieville) in Canada. He died on May 31, 1874 in Shédiac, N.-B.

Red River

Then, placing in my hands a letter of recommendation to Paul Dagenais of *Rivière-aux-Rats*, renowned far and wide for his artistry with carriages, he smiled :

—*You see, my child, muskrats flourish everywhere.*

At this beloved name —*Rivière-aux-Rats*!— a wave of old memories surged in me, like the sweet ache of a forgotten lullaby.

Yet before undertaking this new odyssey, I had to master the art of riding. For a whole month, I learned to govern my steed under the unseen gaze of my beloved Rémi — my husband in life, my guardian angel in death. Invisible but palpable, he hovered near, an ethereal flame warming my chilled heart. When doubt seized me, I would lift my gaze to the sky, and through the shifting clouds, Rémi would whisper counsel to my soul.

The bitter resentment that had once clouded *Pointe-au-Baptême* was washed away; I saw now in Rémi only the purest of saints — faithful by obligation perhaps, but faithful all the same.

And my dear Malou — what of him? I often imagined my loyal dog curled beneath the tavern counter in Montréal, ready to defend his new master with the bravery only animals can summon.

I christened my splendid appaloosa *Pompon*, a name unmartial and tender, a name born from my childhood in Trois-Pistoles. It was the name of the first horse I had loved, lost long ago to the icy maw of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Thus did *Pompon* bind my lonely heart to the soft memories of my vanished homeland, an invisible thread woven from the tears of exile.

Around the austere bastion of Pembina, the small village swelled, as wildflowers spring from fertile soil — but among these flowers grew the inevitable weeds. Taverns, gambling dens, and sordid houses of pleasure multiplied like vipers among the vines. Everyone

Red River

knew that voyageurs, flush with pay, were rich for a day — naïve pigeons ripe for the plucking.

Soon, a lawless crowd invaded Pembina: adventurers, rascals, fugitives from every one of the thirty American states and territories still without a name. Leather holsters flapped at their thighs, and pistols glinted in the sun like the fangs of some great beast. They dared not affront the Métis, for this people — peaceful though they were — had long since proven they could not be cowed. The battles of 1851, and the wars yet to come in 1870 and 1885, would immortalize their valor.

As a newly landed *voyageur*, I became the prey of every species of human vulture that circled over the town — parasites fattened by the labor and blood of others. It is ever thus : in every trade where hardship is great and reward is rare, a shadow horde lies in wait to feast on the sweat of the just.

There, in those dens of illusion, opium — that dark nectar imported by British ships from Bengal — began to seep, like a poisonous mist, into the veins of Pembina. I often passed men with hollow eyes, wandering the night like ghosts seeking oblivion. But my soul, armored by sorrow and Rémi's invisible hand, kept me from the abyss. My nature, forever a *casseux-de-veillées*, a killjoy, spurned such poisoned pleasures.

Before the missionaries had come, whites and Métis had married “*after the fashion of the country*,” taking wives without the blessing of the Church, binding hearts with a glance, a clasped hand, a whispered vow. Successful trappers sometimes kept two, even three wives, but the French and Métis bent their necks to the clergy's yoke, obeying the iron rule of monogamy under the stern gaze of Rome.

Still, the trading companies, ever pragmatic, had blessed these unions, knowing full well that every new tie to the native tribes wove stronger their empire.

Red River

—*The Métis are born traders, speaking the tongues of many nations*, Abbé Belcourt said to me one day, with a smile full of both sadness and pride.

I soon faced a new terror: not poverty, but its mirror image — the dread of losing my fortune. When I had been penniless, I had feared only hunger; now, with a full purse, I feared thieves, brigands, murderers. I had become, I realized, a walking bank vault, a treasure chest without locks. A single misstep, a single shadow from an alley, and all my months of toil and tears could be swept away with the thrust of a dagger.

In this wild West where men killed for a single beaver pelt, secrecy was my only shield. Not courage, not even the quickest draw, could save me — only the silence of a hunted animal.

Thus did I learn, trembling but wiser, that wealth is no balm for fear ; it is only a heavier chain.



In 1816, the *Battle of La Grenouillère* (or *Seven Oaks*) marked the beginning of the Métis Revolt against the *British Hudson Bay Company*, which was trying to impose total commercial control on the Métis and Indian population and on the *North West Company*, ending with the destruction of the Montreal Fur Company in favor of the *BHBC*. [Priv. Coll.]

Chapter 27
Over-Oiled Triggers

In Pembina's squalid taverns, the air reeked of cheap alcohol, burnt oil, and the acrid scent of danger. It was there, among these darkened dives, that itinerant traders, drifters, and hollow-eyed cowboys gathered like vultures, seeking a shortcut to fortune — or perdition.

Their scarred and sneering faces, broken by too many brawls and too much whiskey, inspired in me neither sympathy nor pity, but an instinctive revulsion. I averted my gaze, knowing too well that these gallows-birds, ever suspicious, might read in a single glance the shadow of accusation, and answer it with a bullet from a too-eager, too-oiled trigger.

The faces of these fugitives were the very mirrors of damnation — twisted, weather-beaten visages with the yellowed teeth of jackals and the fevered eyes of men forever on the run. One could almost hear the blasphemies clinging to their breath, like the stench of decay to a corpse. And if it is true that the soul shines through the face, then these vagabonds — these bush-beaters, these deserters from the ragged armies of America or Mexico — were already dead men, moving only by the force of stubborn malice.

—*Would you like a beer ?* whispered Ti-Louis Latraverse, a Métis of lively spirit who had become my companion among these savage precincts.

—*Why not !* I answered, with a flash of bravado. *Cré moé ! It's warm enough to cool off !*

Without seeming to, I scrutinized Ti-Louis with the instinctive calculations of a young woman who, despite the perils of the frontier, had not forgotten that life must go on — and that life, perhaps, could yet bloom again. He was handsome, spoke with wit, and moved with the

Red River

vigor of one who had not yet been broken by the Prairie's cruelty. As for morality and honesty — well, those refinements would be for me to teach, as a diligent gardener prunes a wild rose.

That Friday afternoon, we sat at a rickety table in a filthy tavern, sheltering from the dusty street where a madcap flock of pigeons had scattered in terror before the barking of a giant Malamute. My poor Malou, I thought wistfully, would never have wasted his breath on such ignoble prey. He had been a gentleman among dogs.

At the next table sat a vagabond so saturated in danger that even the tavern-keeper watched him with the awe due a hurricane. His battered hat shed a faded lock of dirty-blond hair over a face so battered that it seemed chiseled by violence itself. He drank with the grim determination of a man drowning sorrows deeper than the sea, lazily brushing away the flies that clung to him like memories.

It was then I noticed a \$2 bill lying beneath his chair, stirring with every gust of foul tavern air. In French, I pointed to it with my finger. He stirred, his bloodshot eyes narrowing dangerously, his body tensing as if to spring.

—*What's up ?* he growled, his voice rasping like a hinge in an abandoned prison.

—*Argent... à terre ! tombé !* I said, cautiously.

He glanced down, then back up at me with a distrust that might have erupted into murder. Slowly, he retrieved the fluttering bill.

—*Merci !* he muttered.

—*Oh! Vous parlez français ?* I asked, testing the waters.

Red River

—*Oui. Je suis un Cajun*,³⁹ he said, the word rolling strangely from his tongue.

—*Cajun ?*

—*Oui, de Baton-Rouge*, he nodded.

Curious, reckless even, I pressed further.

—And where are you going?

He smiled darkly.

—I go where my footsteps take me. When I'm broke, I dig in a mine. Not easy. My scars scare good people away.

—*It's human*, I murmured.

At that instant, fate, which had been idly smoking in the corner, flung its gauntlet into the dust : a fight erupted between two card players. A big Texan, wronged by a mere boy in a game of chance, flipped the table in rage and seized the youth's purse, felling him with a single brutal blow.

The Cajun beside me rose to his full, formidable height.

—*Hey ! Cowboy !* he bellowed. *You can go if you like, but leave that wallet behind !*

The saloon froze. The Texan turned red with fury, and strode back toward the Cajun, his fists coiled like snakes. But with a swiftness born of many fights and darker things, the Cajun tripped him neatly and sent him sprawling into the dirt.

³⁹ "Yah. I'm a Cajun." ... "Yes from Bat'n Rouge."

Red River

—*Watch your step, cowboy, or you'll break your nose again !* he said, with a mocking grin.

No laughter broke the tension. Everyone knew the Texan would not take such humiliation lying down. He rose, dusted himself off — and drew his revolver.

But at that same moment, a half-dozen other pistols appeared, their black mouths yawning like miniature graves.

—*You'd better get outta here,* hissed the Cajun, *or you'll feed the wolves with your bones !*

The Texan, white with rage, threw the wallet back to the floor, holstered his gun, and fled without a word.

—*You come back, and I'll shoot you myself !* roared the Cajun.

When the dust had settled, I leaned in with a smile :

—*I liked your kneestrike, Bro ! Not bad, pantoute !*

Like every soul wandering these lawless lands, I carried my small fortune on me : hidden deep within my embroidered *mittasses* were my banknotes, sewn carefully into secret pockets, thickening my leather clothing and making me, paradoxically, safer. A few silver coins jangled in my sash, but the heart of my wealth hugged my thighs like a secret armor.

How often I thought of Rémi then ! If only he were at my side, if only I could lean against his strength once more ! But now, Rémi lived among the clouds and the winds, and answered my unspoken questions with the silent wisdom of the dead. Oh, how much easier it is to live with a spouse once he no longer argues !

Red River

On the vast Prairie, the horse was our canoe, and we, its tireless paddlers. I galloped across the endless flatlands, rifle in hand, axe at my belt, imagining how I must appear: a proud, wild creature, half-woman, half-legend. And I laughed, thinking :

—If Maman saw me now, she would have a whole litany of reproaches ready !

But Rémi's spectral voice always whispered in the wind :

—Be yourself, darling, and fear no one — even your mother !

In these savage lands, to survive was to be prepared, and I honed my skill at throwing axes and daggers, trained my eye for musket shots, proud of my Charlesville musket, which perhaps had once roared at Saratoga or Yorktown under a French-Canadian banner. *One must look dangerous to remain safe*; such was the first law of the Prairie.

When the time came to cross alone to Rivière-aux-Rats, I arranged to ride with a Métis named Napoléon Houde. As we trotted through the plains, I teased him :

—Where did you get that name ? There's no Saint Napoleon !

He laughed:

—No saint, no ! A French general. A man who frightened all Europe...

Curious, he spotted my musket and said :

—A Charlesville ! Rare now. Everyone had one after the American Revolution.

I smiled proudly.

Red River

—My great-grandfather fought at Lexington, Saratoga, and Yorktown. But when he came back to Canada, he was excommunicated.

—Excommunicated ? For fighting the British ? he asked.

—Yes. The Catholic Church demanded loyalty to the English crown. Even in death, they refused him a grave — but his family secretly buried him among their own, by moonlight.

Napoléon, seasoned in the tragedies of men and nations, shook his head.

—Batoche ! He was a true hero.

That evening, we found shelter in Aubigny⁴⁰, a small village that bore the same name as the town across from Québec City — Aubigny, my heart whispered, and I felt for a moment as if the vast Prairie had folded itself around me in a distant, bittersweet embrace.



Overnight Bivouac. [Priv.Coll.]

⁴⁰ I am not sure if it was Aubigny. I am way too old now to remember.

Red River

Chapter 28

I Build My Nest

The next morning, like a swallow seeking a hollow in the eaves against the oncoming storms, I reached Rivière-aux-Rats. There, Providence placed upon my path Paul Dagenais, a rustic patriarch whose vast home, animated by the laughter of children and the fragrance of woodsmoke, opened to me like a fraternal inn.

—In winter, he told me with a voice full of slow assurance, I pursue the muskrat and the creatures of the fur. In summer, I lend my hand to carts and houses... according to the needs of men.

—And how much would a cart cost me ? I asked, already dreaming of a chariot to carry the remnants of my fortune across the trembling earth.

—Four pelues. But if you put your shoulder to the task, three shall suffice.

—Done ! I said, extending my hand, as one seals a pact between honest souls.

Without delay, Paul seized his axe and led me beneath the vault of the trembling poplars. There, he felled the great white liards whose sap still cried out in the midday heat, for we needed wood as supple and alive as the very blood of trees.

—Never sever the wood across its grain, he instructed gravely. *To do so is to wound it mortally.*

Thus was born, beneath our calloused hands, my Red River cart — a marvel without a nail or a bolt, held together by the sacred joining of tenon and mortise, pegs and silent wisdom. It was as if the spirit of the

Red River

forest, unwilling to bear the insult of iron, had whispered the secret of true construction into the ears of our ancestors.

This cart could float on rivers, could stand upright in a barn like a sleeping ship, and above all, it sang. O yes ! The unbarked axle, stripped only by time and the caress of use, gave forth a thin, plaintive note — a violin of green wood. When a caravan of carts traversed the plain, it was as though an orchestra of dissonant, stubborn violinists trailed in our wake, lamenting the ancient forests lost to our ambition. If ever the fools greased the axles, the thick dust of the prairies glued them shut with a furious stubbornness, and the cart became mute — a crime against its living soul.

While our hands worked, Paul's voice taught me more than any book.

In the early days after Canada fell, he told me, the British, fearful and haughty, sought to muzzle the vanquished Catholics with the Test Act, casting them as soldiers and servants, barring them from power. But the thunder of American liberty soon growled at their borders, and prudence forced them to court the French-Canadian Clergy. Thus, the Test Act was repealed in Canada — yet in a cruel bargain, the Church pledged to excommunicate any soul who dared defy the Crown. A heavy price, paid by proud men in thick silence.

As for the beasts of burden, I had to choose between speed and strength. Speed fled me like a fickle mistress : I traded my light cayuss for a Charolais ox, slow but indomitable, whose shoulders seemed cut from the living rock of Burgundy. The cart's sides and tailgate were lattices of slender clerestory planks, airy as the wings of a saint's reliquary.

In a short week, my rolling citadel was complete.

The winter drifted in, soft and slow as a funeral shroud. Paul taught me the old lore of the trapper's art.

Red River

—*Here, he said, the beaver and muskrat reign. Farther afield, marten, otter, wolf, fox, mink, and deer with eyes of shadow.*

—*And how do you find their traces ?* I asked, avid to unlock the secrets of this hidden realm.

—Follow the willows and alders that cradle the waterways. When you see the chewings, the dams, the silent works — you know you have found them.

He taught me to approach walking in the cold current, leaving no scent for suspicious nostrils. He showed me where to bury the iron jaws of the trap, where to hang the bait — a slender branch anointed with the sacred perfume of *castoreum*, that musky whisper of the beaver's soul.

—*The beaver, he said, smells it from afar, rises to investigate* — to lift its head, he puts its foot on the pole on which the trap is attached and... *and then, fate strikes.*

I shivered.

—*Poor creature*, I murmured, a flush of shame coloring my cheeks.

Paul fixed me with eyes half amused, half reproachful.

—*Bah! If your heart bleeds so easily, you'll make a poor trapper.*

—*Forgive me !* I cried. *I wish to grow hard, like iron hammered by fire.*

He smiled, and continued, unveiling the hard necessity of survival : the traps must be cleaned and greased, the skins carefully stretched, and the scent preserved like a treasure. Nothing must be wasted; even the *castoreum* branch could feed the eternal hunger of the land.

Red River

When I asked about thieves, Paul shrugged.

—The Indians ? he said. No more thieves than we. They simply do not see the world through the same glasses. Ownership to them is a mist that drifts with the seasons. He recounted how once he had pursued trappers-turned-thieves for three days, reclaiming his stolen goods with musket in hand.

Action, peril, and the fierce embrace of life — all awaited me. Throughout that long, bone-pale winter, I trapped for two hours each day, learning the secret rites of survival. I practiced with musket, dagger, and axe until my hands knew them better than prayer.

And in the evenings, I spoke to my husband. Yes! To him who dwelt now among the stars. And from beyond the veil of death, his voice answered me. Clear, strong, faithful — As if the heavens themselves were bending low to whisper hope into my weary heart.



My “nest”. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 29
Unforgettable Parties

In the white vastness of those glacial winters, on certain desolate Saturdays when the stars hung like icy lanterns above the endless prairie, invitations would drift to me, light as snowflakes, from the hearths of the "French" — thus were called, with a reverence tinged with melancholy, *the Métis and the exiled sons of the St. Lawrence*.

Most winterers, cast adrift like wandering planets, returned to their native shores but once every five or six revolutions of the earth around the sun. Yet, in the raw cabins of the West, they kept alive, as one guards a sacred flame against the gales, the fierce gaiety of their ancestral feasts. It was a gaiety born of struggle and solitude, a feverish laugh wrested from the lips of fate itself.

—*Alexie, come laugh, dance, eat and sing! It's good en môôdit!* cried my new companions, and among them bold-eyed girls whose laughter trembled like birdsong on the frozen wind.

I let myself be carried into their revels, less to quench my sorrow than to mask it, like a wound hidden under a soldier's bright uniform. No one here knew that I had lost... my husband. And I kept my silence, for among these pious souls, mourning, once discovered, would have become a tyranny — a black veil thrown over the soul when it longs for the pale light of private grief.

At sunset —that breathless hour when the sun seems to die of cold behind the last dunes of snow— I set out toward the house of Jean-François Lajoie, a Métis whose very name sang of joy. Above the low roofs of Pembina, the last light clung like a tattered banner to the chimneys, and the smoke, blue and fragrant, braided itself into the sky.

Red River

The evening began with a feast —wild fruits, black bread, pemmican stew— and songs, those immortal songs that, like old pilgrims, had crossed the Atlantic and the endless plains to rest here, for a night, among friends. Then came the dances, wild and endless, to the heartrending wails of violins, the throbbing heartbeats of drums, the winking laughter of harmonicas, those *ruin-lips*⁴¹ whose plaintive notes seemed to unravel the fabric of night itself.

In this whirlwind of dust and music, it was a question of who could sing louder, stamp harder, laugh longer. *Party-poopers* like me were forgiven, for I was still cloaked in the mystery of the newcomer.

The ball unfurled in a single low room, its walls heavy with the smell of tallow, tobacco, and sweat. There was no woodfloor —only beaten earth— and when the dancers leapt and spun, a golden dust rose up in trembling columns to meet the frail light of the tallow lamp above the hearth. The shadows swayed and wrestled against the whitewashed walls, monstrous and graceful by turns.

I tried to dance, God knows I tried ! But soon, ashamed of my clumsy feet, I withdrew to the margins, where the men sat laughing, and the women, like rows of bright petals, lined the walls, chattering and bursting into silver peals of laughter whenever the tumult allowed it.

A stew of pemmican simmered low in the fireplace, filling the air with a scent thick and heady as first love. Above it all, the fiddles sobbed with a wounded grandeur, as though remembering lost rivers and forgotten forests.

Once, as I gazed at a chubby, solemn infant staring wide-eyed at the whirling shadows, I murmured :

—*Maybe one day, one of them will be mine.*

⁴¹ We called them *les ruines-babines*.

Red River

And a voice —soft, aching— whispered in my ear :

—I hope so.

It was Rémi's voice, rising from the grave of memory.

—I wish you that happiness... and regret that we did not seize it when we could.

I closed my eyes a moment, overcome by that fatal tenderness that both nourishes and devours the soul.

Around me, the dances continued with relentless fervor. Some girls were bold, darting kisses like arrows ; one brushed my lips with hers in a flash of laughter, and I smiled back, half in gratitude, half in sadness.

How sweetly these people knew how to be giddy with life ! How stubbornly they clutched at happiness, even when life offered only dust and exile ! The ancient airs of France fluttered above our heads like tattered banners :

"V'la l'bon vent, v'la l'joli vent..."

"Lève ton pied, jolie bergère..."

"Les matelots s'en vont à leur vaisseau..."

At other times, in the homes of the French-Canadians, cotillions and quadrilles spun through the air, and for a few dizzying moments, I forgot my sorrow, forgot myself, forgot even the bitter pull of time. Sometimes, laughing, I took the wrong place in the dance, amid the delighted cries of those around me.

The music did not always need a violin to weep. A bagpipe could sing of sadness, a fife could whisper of home, a panpipe could call to distant hills... and in the roaring of the hearth and the swirling of skirts, I felt life itself —brief, burning, and vanishing— slip through my fingers.

Red River

Yet always, always, beneath the wild beating of the drum, there lay the heavy beat of memory.

My faithfulness to Rémi was not a vow, but a wound; a deep and stubborn wound that refused to heal. I still spoke to him sometimes in the privacy of my soul:

—Ah, Rémi! Why did you risk all for a foolish canoe ? Life could have been so luminous beside you !

But he did not answer.

That night, as the first pale fingers of dawn pried at the shutters, I was offered steaming cups of black tea, puddings heavy with wild berries, coarse black bread ground from prairie wheat, salmon from the Red River — and finally that strange and savory mud of pemmican and potatoes, whose perfume had haunted my senses from the moment I had stepped over Jean-François Lajoie's humble threshold.

And when at last I stumbled home across the frozen Plain, drunk not with liquor but with memory and sorrow and half-remembered songs, I could almost have believed that life was not so cruel, nor so brief, after all.



The Métis knew how to have fun. [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 30 **The Bison Hunt**

At last, the spring of 1851 unfurled before my dazzled eyes its splendid pageant of rebirth — and with it, the clarion call of the Great Buffalo Hunt. My soul soared, carried aloft on invisible wings, for at each new season of joy, the tender memory of Rémi blossomed anew within me.

I imagined him always by my side, as a faithful shade guiding my steps through the tumultuous trials of life. Had he not been the first to displace from my heart the stern image of my mother, she whose worn principles had so long weighed upon my youth with the gravity of lead ?

One radiant Sunday, as if borne on angelic winds, all the parish priests of Red River proclaimed from their pulpits the sacred date of the Great Hunt. Pembina, our rallying point, became a maelstrom of life.

From every quarter of the boundless plains, convoys emerged like pilgrims to a holy festival. In a single surge, thirteen hundred souls and eleven hundred Red River carts converged — an epic host such as only the Wild West could gather, in those fleeting years when eternity still seemed to breathe through the open land.

—*MonOncle is coming with all the cousins from Fond-du-Lac !* resounded joyously through the encampments.

Like my Métis brethren, I adorned myself in the noble costume of the hunt : a supple deerskin jacket embroidered with a constellation of bright floral beads, black wool breeches clasped at the knees by leather leggings, and at my waist the shimmering arrow sash of *L'Assomption*, woven by the deft hands of distant Canadian villagers.

Red River

On my feet, soft moccasins; upon my head, a felt hat, broad-brimmed and feathered — a touch of gallantry amidst the ruggedness of the Grand Plains. Around me, my companions were similarly arrayed, some with toques, others with simple Indian bands restraining their flowing hair.

The Métis women, those proud queens of the wilderness, wrapped themselves in long black woolen gowns, their lustrous hair modestly veiled beneath silk shawls — to shield the men, it was said, from the fever that such radiant beauty might inspire.

Thus arrayed, and accompanied by an ecstatic multitude of dogs —those faithful dreamers of the hunt— we set forth. The Prairie, that immense and ancient ocean of grass, stretched before us to the farthest horizon. On certain days, its verdant waves lay still as glass ; on others, possessed by unseen furies, they trembled under the assault of winds that clashed in savage rivalry, as if the four corners of the earth had declared war upon one another.

Ovide Pelletier, who rode alongside me with his rifle across his knees, smiled grimly :

—Beware, Alexis, he said, when the winds contend like this, it is the prelude to the birth of terrible tornadoes, destroyers of all that we cherish.

—And here I thought, I replied, that Mother Nature had reserved all her favors for us !

But the south wind triumphed that day, driving before it the others, and all night we were buffeted by its scorching breath. By dawn, I saw that the prairie grass, which had been so fiercely green, had begun to wither into the first sorrowful hues of drought.

The town crier, Napoléon Jolicoeur, galloped up to me, his horse snorting fire :

Red River

—*Alexis! Ambroise Courtemanche offers to board you through the hunt — one pelue and ten pennies per week.*

—*At the next halt, I would go and thank him, for I knew the divine touch of Aurélie Courtemanche's cooking.*

Thus reassured, I surrendered once more to the intoxicating grandeur of the Plains.

In some places, the ocean of grass was as smooth and serene as an ancient sea stilled by the gods. In others, invisible tempests had carved waves into stone, leaving undulating hills, slopes, and hidden hollows, where the long grass seethed like a furious mane under the breath of the wind. Above, the sky remained a blue abyss, across which not even the bold tourtes dared to fly.

Soon, Father Laflèche, astride his sturdy cayuss, joined me, his kindly face flushed with pastoral concern:

—*Alexis, why were you absent from Mass last Sunday ?* he asked with gentle severity.

—*Ah, Father, I stammered, I was ill... bedridden the whole day.*

—*You are absolved, my son !* he said, smiling. *The sick are free even from the strictures of fast and penance.*

Thus chastened and inwardly trembling, I vowed then and there —beneath that boundless, pitiless sky— that I would never again neglect my duties before God and man.

The Prairie spread around us like the first morning of the world. Here and there, dark ponds lay cradled in shallow depressions, their surfaces flickering with the ghostly reflections of passing clouds. In those limpid waters, little ducklings played, exorcising with their innocent joy the somber menace of the arid land.

Red River

Day after day we advanced along the invisible ridge of the Continental Divide — the high seam of North America, where rivers were sent either north to Hudson Bay or south to the Gulf of Mexico. The very backbone of the world.

Father Lacombe, ever the fountain of wisdom, explained :

—*Your ancestors, the voyageurs, named this country 'La Prairie' for its endless grasses, and 'La Pelouse' for the shorter growth of the dry highlands. The proud lapelouse [apaloosa] horses you see — those are the descendants of Indian breeds raised on those ancient plateaus.*

I listened with awe, feeling the grandeur of the past flow into me like a benediction.

Soon, a great decision loomed. The *Grand Council* of our people — those proud Métis governors, elected by the voice of free men — would choose : would we hunt the buffalo in the northwest Prairie-planche of the Saskatchewan, or would we dare the perilous descent to the Missouri Hills, into the dread domain of the Sioux-Tétons ?

On June 19th, beneath the lonely gaze of the *Maison-du-Chien*, the Council met, and in their wisdom —or folly— decided to brave the Sioux. Our great host would divide : a smaller, weaker column would skirt the Grand-Coteau, acting as bait; while the main force, the flower of Saint-François-Xavier, would strike southwestward, ready to come to our aid if the Sioux sprang their trap.

I, Alexie, was to march with the bait.

Though none spoke of it openly, the truth seeped through the camps like a cold mist. We were *lambs* sent to draw the *wolves*.

Yet what lambs ! Each cart bristled with muskets ; each man wore his courage as a shield. The Saulteaux warriors from the north, our

Red River

silent allies, had been summoned to our cause, unseen but inevitable as thunderclouds gathering beyond the horizon.

For days we trained incessantly, racing to form our fortified circles at every halt, encircling the sacred ponds of life-giving water. By the end of a week, we could entrench ourselves in less than twenty minutes — a feat born of desperation and grim necessity.

On June 28th, our paths diverged: the main column veered southwest toward the Missouri, while we of the Saint-Boniface-Pembina party lingered near the Maison-du-Chien, awaiting the hour of destiny.

The land changed as we marched : a clay-riddled waste of ponds and marshes, a battlefield better suited to frogs and ducks than to bison. The dust of the prairie baked into a hard, russet crust under the merciless sun.

On the morning of July 12th, we advanced at a crawl, the creaking of our ox-carts mingling with the cries of restless birds overhead. In my hand I carried my ancient Charlesville musket, an old veteran of wars long past, its bayonet glinting like a promise — or a warning.

—*What are we waiting for ?* I dared to ask Father Laflèche.

He smiled, enigmatic :

—*Patience, Alexis. Obedience and faith will be your shield.*

—*What is your horse's name, Mr. Chaplain ?* I asked, changing the subject.

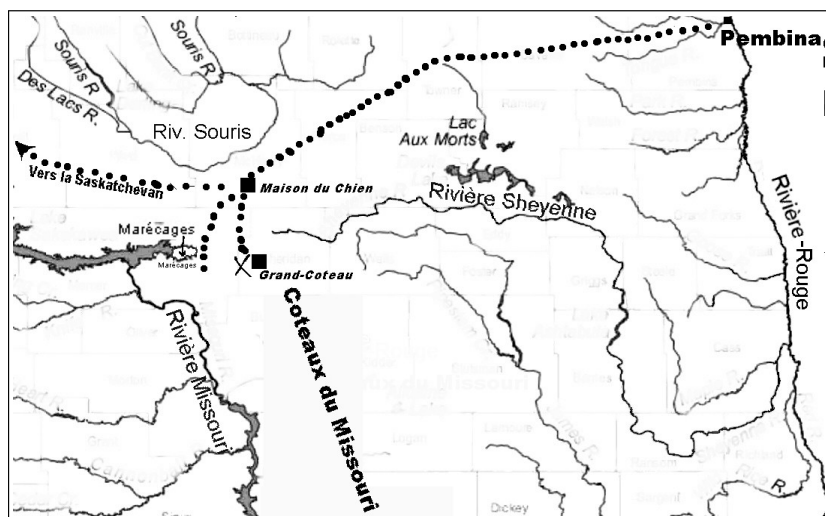
—*Bayard, because he is a horse “without fear and reproach”, like a French knight of the Renaissance who bore the same name !*

Red River

I knew then (about our strategy) that he hid the full truth from me, to spare my soul the weight of dread. Yet I felt it in the marrow of my bones : the storm was gathering.

At last, we sighted the Grand-Coteau — a mere ripple on the vast Prairie, yet pregnant with menace. There, beneath the cold and indifferent heavens, our fate awaited us.

And still ahead, beyond the reach of mortal eyes, unseen and implacable as destiny itself, the Sioux watched and waited.



Route followed in 1851 by the two columns of Métis to the Grand-Coteau. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 31
The Sioux Dispute Our Hunting Grounds

There are truths that the soul only consents to recognize after the ordeal has passed. Today I know it : as we crossed that deceptive immensity of grass, sky, and stagnant waters, our chiefs were fully aware that we were but the goat led to lure the wolf. We dragged our feet willingly, weaving the trap with our very bodies, offering the impatient Sioux the illusion of an easy triumph.

Sometimes, upon the ridges of earth where the mirages wavered like dreams, a handful of Sioux warriors would appear, their feathered silhouettes sharp against the blazing vault of the sky, as if spirits sent to warn or to threaten. Their presence was a breath upon our necks — silent, inexorable.

Two stragglers — one of them my friend, poor Alphonse Dumont — were nearly captured that Sunday, a day on which, despite the trembling protests of piety, Father Laflèche had sanctioned our march. His blessing alone shielded us from the murmurs that would have seen in this misfortune a mark of divine wrath.

On the eve of our trial, July 12th, our scouts ascended the Grand-Coteau, and from that natural watchtower their gaze plunged eastward — where the world itself seemed to swell and boil with life. There, crowned by the heavens, a vast Sioux encampment unfurled: two thousand warriors at least, their tipis clustered like a host of phantoms on the trembling heights.

The signal was given ; the blood answered.

Red River

—*Form the circle !* cried Jean-Baptiste Falcon, his arm cutting the air like an avenging sword. We obeyed with the precision of men long prepared for death.

Swift as a summoned tempest, our Red River carts rose up on their tailgates, forming a jagged palisade, their stretchers pointing skyward like supplicating arms. Within moments, we were a living fortress — a heart beating behind walls of wood, iron, and human will.

Fires were lit; women, calm as queens in the hour of siege, raised the lodges and prepared the evening's meal with the solemnity of those who know it might be their last.

Our oxen and horses —the lifeblood of our march— were herded within the enclosure, their great eyes reflecting both trust and terror. They fed nervously on the scorched grass and drank from the pond whose black waters shivered beneath a coppery sky.

Everywhere, the fever of preparation burned. Earthworks rose like scars upon the ground. Loopholes were carved into the very flesh of the carts. The fleur-de-lis, our last cry to the heavens, snapped in the wind, nailed high upon a drawbar.

As I worked, Father Laflèche passed near me, murmuring in a voice that seemed to come from beyond the tomb :

—*Ultima ratio regum !*

—*What do you say, Father ?* I asked, my spade trembling.

—*A King's last argument*, he replied. *And perhaps ours as well.*

The Sioux, like the ancient monarchs of Europe, had chosen force as their only tongue.

Red River

Soon, five of us were sent out as envoys — myself among them. We ascended the Grand-Coteau, where the Prairie sky seemed to lower itself to caress the rolling summit of the hill. There, from the Sioux camp, a hurricane of riders burst forth. They surrounded us with the inevitability of a closing fist. Their chief, resplendent in eagle plumes, bade us come into their midst.

—*We are prisoners*, I whispered to Joseph Beaulieu, who answered me only with the pale terror of his eyes.

At a nod, I veered left, Joseph right. Bullets and arrows rained around us, the song of death in our ears. By the grace of God and the madness of youth, we reached the circle. The Sioux, wary of our bristling muskets, fell back, raising a hand in the sign of peace — even as their other hands clutched their rifles.

Their leader shouted assurances in broken French, promising the return of our captive in exchange for provisions. But the lie hung in the air, thick as gunpowder.

Three Sioux rode forth, seeking parley. They were met by the gallop of our bravest, who barred the way like a living wall. The Grand Council, in a single breath of grim resolve, decreed that none of the enemy should set foot within our circle, even should it cost the lives of the prisoners.

A shudder passed through our camp, like the first cold wind of winter.

All night we worked — piling clay upon our supplies, weaving the carts tighter still, driving pegs into the earth as though anchoring ourselves to life itself. Each cart was both bulwark and coffin. Our trenches gaped like wounds in the soil. Behind us, the women and children huddled beneath the trembling canvas of the lodges, their prayers rising to a Heaven that seemed too far, too silent.

Red River

We tethered our cattle by the pond's edge, for their loss would mean our doom. Without them, we were stranded souls, adrift on a sea of grass.

Night fell at last — a night without stars, without mercy. A lunar eclipse devoured the heavens, until even the mournful eye of the moon winked out. Darkness, complete and terrible, engulfed us.

The Sioux did not attack.

They, too, perhaps, remembered the ancient name of the French, whispered on these plains like a half-forgotten hymn — a name that still carried, in its fading syllables, the thunder of Austerlitz and the shadow of the Napoleonic Empire.



Column of Métis carts. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 32

Vigil of Arms on the Prairie

The next day was a Sunday—a thirteenth, no less!—and, as if the heavens themselves wished to accentuate our peril, the night before had been consecrated to "clearing one's conscience," as we said in the parlance of men who feel death's cold breath on their napes.

Father Laflèche, our shepherd in this impending storm, heard the confessions of all who trembled for their souls, and, like a vigilant angel, distributed the Holy Communion with a hand both firm and tender.

We were resolved to sell our skins dearly, though we had not the faintest notion that the peril we faced had been conjured—recklessly, even cunningly—by our own commanders, who, in their wisdom or folly, had dared a throw of the dice against fate itself.

None could have foreseen the magnitude of the tempest their scheme would unleash. The very soil of the Grand-Coteau seemed to awaken in wrath, as if the entire Teton-Sioux Nation had agreed, in one solemn accord, to make of this Prairie a vast funeral pyre for the intruders we were.

Only years later, by interrogating my memories a hundred times over, and by gathering the thoughtful recollections of those who survived—among them young Gabriel Dumont, then scarcely more than a boy—did I piece together the dark sequence of decisions that led to our ordeal.

—*Look!* cried a sentry at dawn.

The high ridge of the Grand-Coteau, broken into a thousand gullies and ravines, shivered under the first gold of the rising sun. And there, upon the trembling edge of the world, the silhouettes of warriors began to swell and sharpen into dreadful clarity. Across three kilometers, a

Red River

sinuous line of Sioux horsemen undulated like a monstrous horned serpent, coiling and gliding against the vast, pale sky. The very sight, at once sublime and terrifying, rooted us to the spot.

In the West, the name of Sioux bore the same dreadful weight as the Iroquois had once born in the East. Awestruck, I stood, my eyes devouring the solemn, inexorable march of their army as it descended the gentle slopes toward us, bristling with spears adorned in eagle plumes and rifles that winked ominously in the sun.

—*Ta-bar-nouche !* swore a Métis behind me, pressed to the palisade. *Jamais vu ça ! Avoir su, môôdit, j’serais pas venu !*

At least two thousand warriors, their faces grim with ancestral fury, formed that terrible, living rampart. Against them we would pit only our muskets and our prayers — the women’s supplications rising like incense, the men’s bullets like thunderbolts hurled at the storm.

The Sioux came onward, silent as lynxes, slipping over the broken land with the patient grace of death itself. No war cries split the air ; no taunts jarred the silence. Only a brooding quiet, more dreadful than any shout, wrapped us in a shroud of dread.

Father Laflèche had once told me:

—*The armies of the world scream in battle to frighten the enemy and to silence their own terror. But the Sioux, ah ! The Sioux, ... they advance in silence, like Judgment itself.*

I gripped my musket, feeling Rémi’s silent, watchful presence at my side. Yes, perhaps this was their land — the land they had seized, as always, from other tribes too weak to defend it—but we too sought a home, a breath of liberty under the vast sky. Alas ! Nations are wolves to one another; and selfishness, that primordial vice, ignites wars as easily as tinder takes to flame.

Red River

I understand it even better today, when the world again teeters on the brink of catastrophe.

Our feeble passage near the Grand-Coteau had been a deliberate provocation, a baiting of pride intended to test their mettle — and ours. But we had not expected so overwhelming a reply. If Lacombe's column did not come swiftly to our aid, the jaws of the trap would snap shut, and the Prairie would drink our blood. Already, in my mind's eye, I could see the Sioux spears crowned not only with eagle feathers, but with the severed scalps of my companions.

Lost in these foreboding thoughts, my gaze was riveted to the horde that now reached the foot of the slope—500 meters from our stockade.

Then, the chief appeared.

A titan among men, swathed in eagle feathers that caught the light like fire, he raised his long lance high above his head — a sign of command as old as war itself. The battle-line, undulating and hissing, slowed and came to a halt.

—The reserve cavalry ! Saddle up ! Find out what they want ! barked Captain Jean-Baptiste Falcon, resolute as granite. And keep them away from our palisades!"

Thirty riders, our last hope for a surprise sally, leapt into the saddle — nokotas, pintos, mustangs, and the proud lapelouse flashing under the morning sun. Rifles ready, they sped through the narrow gate, kicking up a thick plume of dust that the steady wind bore northward, like a banner of defiance.

Among the Sioux, we glimpsed three prisoners, mounted and flanked by their captors. Suddenly, one of them struck his mount and tore away, a living arrow flying toward us. He shot through our gate and

Red River

tumbled inside to gasps and laughter — laughter quickly choked by his desperate cry:

—Stop laughing, you idiots ! We're about to face the onslaught of 2,000 warriors !

Even as he spoke, a detachment of 200 Sioux broke from the main force to intercept our parley. Our captain rode forward bearing gifts, speaking in French-Chinook, pleading for peace between our peoples.

The Sioux answered with contempt so icy it burned.

Their chief, magnificent and imperious, declared in fluent French:

—The only gift we accept... is your entire camp ! And your carts will carry our spoils back to our fires !

Never had arrogance worn a more resplendent mask. They sold the bear's skin before the bear was slain !

Our riders, their mission mocked, turned back — pursued by a vanguard that surged toward our walls in a burst of fury. Still, no shot was fired. This was a duel of nerves, of proud hearts testing each other.

Inside the palisade, my heart pounded against my ribs like a trapped bird. I crouched in my trench near the makeshift gate, my musket tight in my hands, my breath shallow.

Our men, chased to the threshold, darted inside—the last horse brushing past just as the gate slammed shut. The Sioux pulled back, save for a handful of reckless Braves who, intoxicated with glory, advanced alone.

Red River

At their head rode a young chief, splendid as the spirit of Manitou himself. His cheeks were painted black for courage; his eagle-feathered headdress crowned him like a living god. So radiant was his beauty, so fierce the nobility of his bearing, that my heart clenched at the thought of shedding such precious blood.

Ah ! How much more we pity the beautiful youth, full of hope and pride, than the old man whose spirit is already half-forgotten by the world !

—*Last warning! Go home !* bellowed Jean-Baptiste Falcon, his voice carrying across the plain like a peal of judgment.

In the suspended silence that followed, the world seemed to hold its breath.

The guns, cold and ready, awaited their dreadful baptism.



Chapter 33
The Battle Rages On

The battlefield held its breath. Even the *tourtes*, those tireless gossipers *ailés* of the plains, seemed to have interrupted their chatter, as if to lend their silence to the unheard-of spectacle about to unfold. Only the dull percussion of hooves, drumming against the hardened earth and the rustling of trampled grass, stirred the heavy air.

My musket lay ready, its barrel resting across the parapet so that its priming might not spill. Beside me, my bayonet was planted upright into the ground like a grave marker awaiting a name.

—*Don't worry, Alexie, I'm here !* whispered Rémi within the deepest folds of my heart.

—*Thank you, my darling. I'm counting on you !* I murmured inwardly.

—*But I still advise you to shoulder your musket instead of daydreaming. Things are about to turn very bad before long !*

I had distracted myself by rolling a cigarette from a pinch of red hart tobacco taken from my petun-bag, seeking, with this trivial act, to steady the fever racing through my veins. Yet even as my eyes drank in the sight of the young war-chief, splendid in his eagle-feather headdress, I heeded my husband's counsel.

I set the cigarette aside upon the parapet and grasped my musket with both hands, murmuring, “*Tabarnouche, Rémi! Ta-bar-nouche!*” in awe of the vision before me. If death must come within the minute, I thought, let it find me gazing upon such magnificence : this peacock-proud Akichita, striding toward us as though shielded by the immortality of his own splendor.

Red River

—*That's how I'd like to die, I thought wildly. Like a useless but sublime heroine !*

—*Enough of that nonsense, Alexie!* came Rémi's reproof from the depths of my being. *This young man is a victim of his own vanity. Many a man, desperate to believe himself admired, will barter his life for a feather's worth of glory ! Glorifying courage to the point of vanity does not breed heroes — it breeds victims. Ready your musket, please !*

Chastened, I refrained from closing one eye, lest my sight grow fatigued before the crucial shot. Dust clouds, heavy as smoke from a Prairie fire, billowed northward. Jean-Baptiste Falcon, our captain, raised his voice in Lakota, hailing the rash boy, bidding him return.

Yet the young man, reckless to the point of madness, pressed forward, imagining, no doubt, the adoring gaze of his people upon him — entrapped by the very vanity he sought to inflame.

At last, a single shot shattered the awful stillness. The boy fell forward, arms spread like a cross, his eagle-feathered mantle fluttering down to shroud his lifeless form. Behind my cart, Jean-Baptiste Falcon, face grim, lowered his smoking musket.

—*Triple idiot !* he muttered between clenched teeth, furious at having been forced to fell this young hero, who had wagered his life against the wind.

The gunshot was the spark; the Prairie exploded into war.

As far as the eye could see, the Sioux forces — a living lasso three kilometers long — coiled around our humble redoubt, tightening like a serpent around its prey. Two thousand mounted warriors, in a thundering, circling stampede, poured arrows and gunfire upon us. Some riders fell like stones into the tall grass, struck by the sure aim of our Métis sharpshooters. Yet they were but droplets against the ocean of assailants.

Red River

Within our trenches, Father Laflèche had donned his priestly vestments —surplice, alb, stole, and chasuble— and, wielding a great wooden crucifix like a knight his sword, went from cart to cart, heartening the children and women who cowered in terror. His voice soared above the thunder of battle :

—Hail Mary, full of grace...

The Sioux faltered momentarily, astounded that we had not crumbled at once. In that hesitation, two French prisoners attempted escape. One succeeded —galloping down the slope on a swift appaloosa— and hurled himself into the sanctuary of our camp.

The other, poor Jean-François Malaterre, his horse a miserable nag, fought to cover his comrade's retreat. Drawing a hidden pistol, he fired into his captors before being overwhelmed. His body, riddled with arrows and bullets, was torn apart and displayed to our horrified eyes — a grotesque error that only steeled our resolve to fight to the death.

Despite their bravery, the Sioux possessed a flaw fatal to their ambitions : absolute individualism. Unwilling to bow to a unified command, their assaults remained chaotic and fragmented — an error that would not be repeated at Little Big Horn twenty-five years later.

The battle raged like a summer tempest. Lead balls and arrows shrieked past us like swarming hornets. Above it all, Father Laflèche's voice rang out :

—Fight for your children ! Die, if you must — but die bravely !

His courage, clothed in white vestments and luminous faith, made a fortress stronger than any palisade.

Meanwhile, our rifles cracked in rhythmic reply. We fired from behind our makeshift earthworks, exposing only our heads and shoulders, while the Sioux riders, galloping bare-backed, offered fleeting,

Red River

vulnerable targets across the vast open Prairie that stretched from the Grand-Coteau to the Missouri's unseen horizon.

In the storm of smoke and dust, a horse — an appaloosa run wild — blundered into my trench, collapsing atop me. Smothered beneath its thrashing body, I fought for breath until it lurched up and galloped away, leaving me bruised and shaken, but alive.

My first true kill came soon after. A warrior — colossal, black-painted in war colors — leapt from his horse, charging toward me with a gleaming steel axe raised high. In mortal terror, I cried out : “Rémi ! Help me ! Give me your strength !

I fired point-blank. The shot hit home. The warrior stumbled, collapsed atop me, and for a dreadful moment, I believed his death had pulled me too into oblivion. But when I opened my eyes, I found myself face-to-face with his blood-smeared visage. Strangely, his wide, unseeing eyes were blue — blue, like the prisoners “adopted” into the tribes. His blood dripped upon me like a baptism into war.

—*Looks like you got yourself a white Indian !* quipped Napoleon Gaudreau when the battle ended, laughing grimly at the black smears on my forehead.

Recovering myself, I pushed his heavy head from my trench and tore a cartridge between my teeth to reload. Around me, our camp stood firm. Jean-François Malaterre was our only dead. Though we had lost some precious oxen, our line held, and our spirits — buoyed by prayer, desperation, and defiant hope — refused to break.

The Sioux, meanwhile, staggered under their losses. They suspended the fight, aghast that mere handfuls of Métis resisted their onslaught. Shame and frustration gnawed at them. In reckless fury, a group surged toward our feeble palisades — but their horses, exhausted, stumbled through the dust and tall grass.

Red River

Throughout, Captain Falcon issued calm, steady orders. Father Laflèche thundered invocations from the trenches; women like Marie-Isabelle Falcon reloaded muskets and prayed, fighting alongside the men.

At last, the Sioux, disheartened, began their retreat — not in unified withdrawal, but in scattered bands, each man obeying the sovereign voice of his own will. They gathered their dead and wounded onto hastily brought wagons and withdrew beyond the first heights of the Grand-Coteau.

Thus ended the Battle of Grand-Coteau after six terrible hours. Against all odds, we had survived.

And in our veins, it seemed, ran not only the blood of the Métis but the stubborn, invincible spirit of Napoleon's old *grogards* — forgotten by the English, perhaps, but immortal in our hearts.



Red River Carts Priv.Coll.

Chapter 34
Tactical Disengagement

A vast and mournful silence stretched across the battlefield, as if the earth itself held its breath after the paroxysm of the day. We, entrenched behind our humble fortifications, remained frozen in our combat postures, rifles at the ready, senses sharpened to the extreme, like beasts scenting unseen peril. Through the whispering veil of the tall grass, we followed with wary eyes the slow ebbing of the Sioux warriors, whose shadows glided away toward the distant hills of Grand Coteau, like wounded spirits retreating into legend.

A conniving gust, borne of the wounded earth, carried to our ears a plaintive murmur. A Métis who knew the Lakota tongue caught the desolate words of a distant chief :

"The French have the Manitou on their side. We shall never overcome them. To kill them is impossible !

Was it not the very echo of Father Laflèche's unwavering faith ? It seemed the heavens themselves wished to conclude the bloody ballet: from the bruised horizon rose a furious storm, whose black and roiling clouds wept torrents upon the ravaged plain, drowning the trenches and quenching the smoldering wrath of men.

The mist, thick and spectral, rose from the sodden ground, blurring the sights of rifles and blotting out the last vengeful arrows of the day.

At twilight, when even hope seemed a reckless thing, a French-Métis sentinel suddenly cried out:

—Riders over there!... It is our scouts returning !

Red River

Panting and splattered with mud, they brought news : the main column had been warned; even now it hastened to our aid. Two Sioux scouts, intercepted on the way, had been deliberately allowed to escape — laden with dread knowledge that reinforcements approached.

Thus fear, that ancient and invisible ally of the beleaguered, gnawed at the hearts of our besiegers. No longer could they dream of starving us into surrender. Time, that stern judge, now marched against them.

As the Sioux withdrew to their camp atop the Grand-Coteau's hilly crown, we ventured out into the battle-scarred field. Blood soaked the grass in dark, solemn pools, and from the scattered stains we reckoned that at least eight Sioux had fallen, with many others wounded.

The torn remains of poor Jean-François Malaterre were discovered —bristling with no fewer than sixty-seven arrows, pierced by three bullets, his flesh offered up to the fury of the enemy. We buried him there, amid the daisies and orange lotuses of the beloved Prairie, that he might rise again, transfigured, in the splendor of wildflowers.

A few Sioux corpses lay too near our lines for their brothers to recover them. On the wise counsel of Father Laflèche, we bore these fallen enemies four hundred meters eastward, laying them on the open glacia where their people could retrieve and honor them according to their ancient rites.

Then night, ancient nurse of terrors, spread her shroud over our camp. From the darkness erupted grotesque howls —a chorus of invisible monsters— as the Sioux harassed us from afar, gnawing at our fraying nerves. Sleep was a stranger to us; each heartbeat was a drumbeat of dread.

Knowing that battle might resume before the relief arrived, our War Council gathered in the blackness. By the flickering light of a single lamp, it was resolved : we must disengage before dawn, moving

Red River

westward toward the Missouri River to meet our rescuers. It was a perilous undertaking, to abandon our trenches under the cloak of night across treacherous ground riddled with unseen ponds and swamps, where a misstep could sink a man into oblivion. And all the while, the Sioux, intrepid and wrathful, hovered like wolves at the edge of vision.

Yet skill and resolve triumphed. Our leaders displayed a brilliance born of necessity — that rare fusion of instinct and calculation that forges great captains. And among them, the young Gabriel Dumont, scarcely thirteen years old, already shone like a blade freshly drawn from its scabbard : ardent, unbreakable, and destined for greatness.

Hours before the pale fingers of dawn unstitched the dark heavens, four scouting parties rode out, one toward each cardinal point, like lonely stars in a vanishing sky. Upon every gentle swell of Prairie, they posted lookouts, torches in hand, to signal any threat before it could engulf us.

Our train of carts —those wheezing wooden leviathans whose shrieking axles betrayed our every movement— was arrayed into four columns : two in the center, followed and preceded by the vanguard and rearguard, ready at the first alarm to wheel into a bristling fortress of wood and iron.

Despite the groaning symphony of our progress, no attack came. The Sioux, chastened by our iron will and daunted by the ghostly prospect of ambush, hesitated to strike. Distrust —that great leveller of courage— had seeped into their ranks.

And in the hush before the coming dawn, Father Laflèche, serene amid the sea of human frailty, clasped his hands and said with quiet majesty :

—The fear our hunters inspire is the beginning of wisdom. Let us give thanks to the Lord !

Red River

Thus did the night pass, and with it, the worst of our peril.



[Priv.Coll.]



Red River

Chapter 35 **The Battle Resumes**

The night winds had swiftly dried the muddy crust left by the previous day's storm. By morning, it seemed the dust had reclaimed its empire beneath our wooden wheels and moccasins, as though rain had never fallen. From the first rays of dawn, a dense cloud of dust enveloped our march, blinding and suffocating us.

That dust could have served as camouflage if it hadn't been quickly torn away by gusts of some treacherous southeast wind. Our rear-guard caught up with hurried steps to deliver the dire news : the Sioux had resumed their offensive.

We had barely marched an hour through the labyrinth of ponds veiled by the dust when dusk fell.

—***Form the circle !*** cried our elected chief, sketching in the bleached heavens a great ring with his torch, adding to this sign a few sharp, sonorous words, whose meaning was superfluous but whose urgency struck like a drumbeat.

The circle sprang to life with lightning speed, animated by the instinct of urgency. Fearing to lose more precious oxen and horses, our leader altered the formation : two concentric circles, a citadel of flesh and wood. In the heart of the first, a pond where the beasts were tethered, encircled by our Red River carts, reared into palisades bristling with loopholes. Sixty meters ahead, the second circle: scattered outposts, mere foxholes fortified with hurried parapets and clumsy embankments of wet clay.

I, Alexie, took my place in one of these lonely trenches. The clay, still sodden beneath the deceptive dryness, bled water with every thrust of my shovel, pooling into a rancid mud at my feet. Each spadeful lifted

Red River

with a heavy, obscene "*shloush*," as if the earth itself groaned under the sacrilege.

—*Tabarnouche*, muttered Paul Lachance and Cléophas Grondin, my distant neighbors, *we dig our graves like fools*.

—*If it fills up*, I quipped, forcing a smile, *we'll have to swim to fight !*

We were but fifty scattered souls stretched along a trembling front of over seven hundred meters. A thin skein of humanity against a sea of wrath.

—*Paul ! Cléophas !* I cried across the misty divide. *Ready ?*

—*Ready to welcome them*, answered Paul, teeth clenched in a grimace that mocked a smile.

—*Not afraid, Cléophas ?*

—*Tired, not afraid*, he barked.

—*And you, Alexie ?*

—*Ready to raise hell, tabarnouche ! No way I'm playing dead anytime soon !*

Yet, as I said it, a shiver ran down my spine. For if death came, it would find me already wrapped in my clay womb, alone beneath the vast Prairie sky. I thought of my mother :

—*Alexie... you'll lose yourself in the wide world !*

A bitter smile twisted my lips.

Red River

—You were right, dear Mamma... and I'm digging my bed in the dust, far from your prayers.

From the depths of my trench, I gazed at the empty heavens. The tourtes had abandoned the sky to our folly. A solitary blue jay scolded us with sharp cries, like a derisive prophet :

—You think yourselves gods, but you are but fools, minousabins !⁴²

The word, dear to Father Laflèche, sounded like an incantation in my mind. I lined up my cartridges along the edge of my parapet, lit my bad *red hart* tobacco, and watched my pipe fizzle. My rifle, loaded and ready, lay across the parapet. Bayonet thrust into the wet clay. Axe at my feet. Dagger and pistol tucked close, talismans against the gaping jaws of fate.

The Sioux, for all their furious courage, lacked that grim discipline the Manitou had withheld from them. And in that chaotic fire of their spirit, I placed my hope.

Two reckless butterflies pirouetted over my trench, dazzling, absurd.

—Fly away, you fools ! Or be crushed like us ! I whispered.

Suddenly, the dust roared open. Out of the smoke and powder, the Sioux came, whirling like storm-tossed leaves, shrieking their war cries :

—Whoop ! Whoop ! Whoop !

The battle was joined anew. Five endless hours of roaring projectiles, slashing arrows, suffocating heat, and blinding dust. My feet

⁴² Minus Habens [latin] = stupid person.

Red River

sank into the muddy bottom, while my face dried and cracked under the unpitying sun.

Far off, amid the cacophony, rose the voice of Father Laflèche, floating like a beacon through the mists :

—*Fight, children of Christ ! Victory is near ! God fights with us !*

And I, half mad with thirst, terror, and rage, called out into the invisible heavens :

—*Rémi ! Help me, tabarnouche ! Don't let me fall !*

Every three or four minutes the dust thinned enough to glimpse a spectral rider. Feverishly, I shouldered my musket, fired, reloaded with trembling hands, biting open the powder cartridges with frantic urgency.

In the chaos, a warrior charged at me, howling, his axe a glint of death. I fired — too late. He fell, but crawled like a serpent toward my trench. Blood gushed over my shoulder — or was it his ? Blindly, instinctively, I hurled my axe. It struck him squarely; he spasmed once, twice, then lay still. The Prairie drank his blood.

No sooner had I wiped my hands on my muddy dress than I heard a cry :

—*Help ! Tabarnouche !*

Cléophas was drowning under a massive Sioux body. I sprang from my trench, my bayonet gleaming in the cursed sun, and drove it deep into the warrior's heaving back. Twice. Thrice. Until he collapsed. Mud and blood splashed my face. I dragged the corpse by the foot, gasping, my fingers slipping on his torn moccasins.

Cléophas' pale face emerged from beneath the heap.

Red River

—*Merci, Alexie, he groaned. Without you, I'd be floating with the clouds.*

I laughed, half-crazed :

—*And you owe me a good drink in Heaven, tabarnouche !*

All along the front, battle raged on — men sunk knee-deep in muck, clawing at life. I plunged back into my trench, rearmed, reloaded, shaking so hard my musket clattered in my hands.

In brief respites between assaults, I heard Father Laflèche's voice, broken, glorious :

—*Fight ! Your ancestors watch you ! Your children await you !*

In my mind's eye, I saw him wielding his wooden crucifix like a sword, rallying us. Better to see it in his hand than nailed over my grave !

At last, after one final howl and one last desperate charge, the Sioux retreated toward the misty heights of Grand-Coteau, their silhouettes swallowed by the boundless horizon. Our bullets chased them like swarming hornets. A deluge burst from the heavens, flooding the Prairie once more. My trench filled with filthy water; I scrambled out, soaked and trembling, to greet the smoking, bloodstained peace.

The battle was over — for now. But in our hearts, the war was only beginning.



Chapter 36

A Proud and Decisive Victory

We bore, with a pride as luminous as the Prairie sky, the immense honour of having twice held in check two thousand Sioux warriors within a single day. Yet this exaltation was tempered by sorrow: the death of the unfortunate Jean-François Malaterre cast a long shadow upon our joy.

That we had suffered so few fatalities seemed, in truth, a miracle, though our wounded were many, and I myself had paid dearly in blood.

The day before, the fall of a warrior, crushed upon me in the melee, had left me senseless. During the second battle, a bullet pierced the flesh of my scalp, and it was only when I felt a hot, treacherous liquid invading my neck and shoulder that I understood: my own blood had painted me before sinking into the folds of my shirt.

The chaplain, versed in the humble art of tending wounds, cared for me. He shaved a patch of hair above my temple with a razor-knife, for the thick filth of battle made cleansing impossible. By grace or chance, the wound spared my modesty — though my right shoulder and breast were stained with blood and mud alike. Beneath the encrusted clay, I bore two gashes upon my arm, several angry bruises — gifts of the appaloosa — and the bitter memory of stray bullets that had torn my shirt and scarred my skin.

Later, we learned that the Sioux had paid a terrible tribute to war : eighty warriors slain, three hundred wounded, and sixty-five horses fallen in the carnage. During the last assault, my neighbour Cléophas had seen horses whose manes had been shorn.

—*They shear the manes of the riderless mounts*, he explained solemnly, *as a sign of mourning.*

Red River

In the West, where a horse was often dearer than gold, this loss was grievous beyond measure — a punishment inflicted by fate itself upon the pride of our adversaries. As for our own leaders, after the cold sweats of combat, they must have secretly rejoiced to see that we had triumphed over the audacity of those proud and dauntless Sioux warriors.

Half an hour after the tumult had faded into the breath of the Prairie winds, the vanguard of our relief force appeared, riding out of the mirages of the Plain — 385 hunters, flanked by three hundred Saulteaux warriors from the distant waters of Lake Manitoba. Their faces fell when they discovered that the battle was done : they had thirsted to avenge the many insults and terrors long inflicted upon them by the Sioux.

Soon the whole column, 685 strong, was with us, their arrival sinking the prairie into a thick and sticky mire. This reinforcement — and not our solitary valour— had truly precipitated the Sioux retreat. We knew it in our hearts, though pride whispered otherwise. Moreover, the Sioux's ammunition had dwindled so severely that, by the battle's end, they resorted increasingly to their ancient bows.

Some of us, French Métis and Saulteaux alike, would have gladly pursued the broken enemy, to punish them once and for all. Yet, the two chaplains —Fathers Lafleche and Lacombe— whose eyes beheld not worldly victories but celestial Justice, sternly forbade it.

—Too much blood has already been spilt, they declared. Let us give thanks to God who preserved us, and pray for the souls of Jean-François Malaterre and our fallen Indian brothers.

Thus, against the instincts of war and vengeance, we sheathed our weapons. This day became, in our memory, the "*Camerone*" of the French-Métis — twelve years before the legendary stand of the *French Foreign Legion* in the distant sands of Mexico. Unlike the *Camerone* heroes, we had conquered; unlike General Custer at Little Big Horn, who twenty-five years later would be crushed beneath the hoofbeats of Sitting Bull's warriors, we had survived and prevailed !

Red River

That same evening, as the stars trembled above the wounded earth, I saw Father Laflèche astride an unfamiliar mount.

—*Father, I cried, what has become of your brave Bayard? Do not tell me he has fallen!*

The priest's weary smile answered me before his words :

—*No, my son. He lives, but his soul is wounded. He trembles at the echo of every gunshot; he is no longer the horse "without fear or reproach" that I once boasted of!*

Thus, even among the victors, there were losses invisible to the eye but grievous to the heart.

Having asserted our courage and our right, we resumed our interrupted hunt. Upon a long pole raised high above the Prairie sea, we tied a letter proclaiming in bold French words : "*This hunting ground belongs to all men, without exception — French and Sioux alike.*"

As we departed, I raised my heart to the heavens and spoke silently to my beloved Rémi. It seemed to me that he had fought at my side, unseen yet unwavering, protecting me through the storm.

—*Not this time, my darling, I whispered to the clouds, smiling through my weariness. But soon. It is not if I shall join you, but when.*

And I fancied that he answered me with a knowing wink, as he always had.

Never again were we assaulted by a Sioux tribe in full strength. Henceforth, danger came only from lone marauders seeking horses or pemmican. The sacrifice of Jean-François Malaterre had purchased, with his life, a fragile but precious peace.

Red River

Our Métis cavalry grew into the finest in the West, a title we bore with fierce pride. In 1870, as the cannons roared across Europe during the Franco-Prussian War, a Métis captain named Napoléon Guay — a veteran of the first Red River Rebellion— began forming a Cavalry Corps to ride to the aid of France.

Volunteers thronged to him with ardor. Yet the war ended too swiftly, sparing the Prussians, perhaps, from tasting the fury of our wild riders ! And as for Emperor Napoleon III, had he remained on his throne, he might have viewed a namesake with suspicion — but history spared him that jealousy, for he was swiftly defeated, captured, and banished to the fogs of England.

Thus turn the wheels of fate — capricious, proud, and pitiless as the great Prairie itself.



Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump. One way the Indians hunted buffalo was to drive their herds up cliffs. But the main cause of the bison's disappearance was the settlers' desire to develop agriculture, which was incompatible with the movement of bison across the prairies. [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 37

I Take a Concession in Aubigny

Thanks to the benevolent guidance and the generous, almost paternal encouragement of the good Paul Dagenais—who, for a few months, had taken me under his roof as an *engagé*—I was able to erect, plank by plank, stone by stone, the fragile temple of my future : my house.

It must be said—though I only understood it later—that the kind man nourished the hope of seeing me join his family by wedding his youngest daughter, the tender Hortense. Yet, I must confess with sorrow that I would have made a poor husband, even to the best of women, for my heart remained bound by invisible chains to my dear, lost Rémi, whose shadow haunted my days as it hallowed my nights.

I carried within me a sorrow so tenaciously that no new bond could take root in its arid soil. I found more comfort in the light-hearted confidences of Augustin, Paul's youngest son, than in any vision of marriage.

He had taken to me with the natural ardor of youth, and I, grateful for his friendship, lent him an attentive ear ; for it is truer still among the lonely that one makes more friends by listening than by speaking. His humor was a balm to my wounded soul, for fantasy, like a sudden breeze on a stifling day, brings blessed relief.

Yet, in the silence of my heart, I dared not take a single step toward him. Any such gesture would have been met with scandal and mockery, in this world so quick to condemn what it does not understand.

Thus, between smiles tinged with melancholy, I set about building my little domain. In these far-flung French-speaking lands of the Red

Red River

River, the ancient spirit of New France still breathed through the seigneurial system.

My concession stretched three thousand meters in length, but only two hundred along the gentle waters of the Rat-River still called Rivière-aux-Rats —a narrow ribbon of life whose presence promised transportation, irrigation, and the simple grace of drinking water.

The rich, dark soil promised abundant harvests of wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, and corn; while further back, meadows awaited the lowing of cattle and the soft whinnies of future horses.

With the help of my faithful Dagenais friends, I built my home in the noble old style *en-pièces-de-charpente*, known here as *Red River Frame*. Massive beams, hewn by the axe's song, formed the skeleton of my refuge.

—*Now*, said Paul, smiling behind his weathered beard, *you must bousiller the walls*.

—*What is bousiller* ? I asked, puzzled.

—*You fill the gaps with cob —clay and straw— a mortar strong enough to defy wind and winter alike. Smells a bit like buffalo dung, but it holds fast.*

And so I set about my task, daubing the walls with a thick clay plaster, whitening them until my home gleamed beneath the vast sky. I spent the summer lifting, hammering, and shaping; the winter sewing dreams into the seams of my little cottage. I lavished special care upon the thatched roof, for in this wild land, the soul of a house lies not in its hearth, but in the shield that guards it against the fury of the skies.

My windows were simple parchment skins, taut and translucent, letting in a pale, trembling light. Glass was a luxury reserved for the rich, and luxury had never been my companion. The winter winds moaned

Red River

against my single sturdy door, but inside, beside the clay fireplace, I created a world of warmth and simple dignity.

In a corner, I fashioned a curtained bed — the sanctuary where, I hoped, my future children would be conceived.

—*Rémi would have wanted it*, I whispered to the fire, to excuse the painful desire that was overwhelming me.

We often deceive ourselves thus, draping our guilty hopes in the shroud of lost loves.

I crafted a solid table, benches, a rocking chair, and heavy trunks to store my few possessions. My walls bore the humble trophies of survival : a musket and bayonet from the battle of Grand-Coteau ; a cartridge pouch ready for emergencies ; my precious flints and tow for fire-making.

Matches were yet a novelty, born far away in Hull, Québec. And on the wall, above my crude furnishings, hung a small mirror — a treasure more dear to me than gold. In it, by the shy glow of the hearth, I could search for traces of beauty, for the promise of seduction I would one day need to awaken a heart to mine.

At times, locked within the tight security of night, I would dress again as a woman. Trembling with the strange mix of dread and desire, I gazed into my mirror. Would I still be beautiful enough to inspire devotion ? Would I still have the power to summon passion, as I once had with my sweet, treacherous Rémi ?

I had bound my breasts so tightly during my wild years of roaming that now I feared they had lost their former grace. Yet I dreamed of the day when, untethered, they would nourish a child born of love rather than despair.

Red River

One winter afternoon, as the snow flurried against the windowless walls, Paul Dagenais broached the subject too plainly to ignore, before the entire Dagenais clan :

—*You have a nest now, Alexis. All you need is a bird to lay eggs.*

I was searching an answer, mortified, but there was no escaping the tide he had unleashed. Paul said :

—*This afternoon, Hortense will come see Alexis's house !*

Poor Hortense turned scarlet; I wished myself invisible. Every pair of eyes pinned me with silent expectations, each glance a whispered judgment.

—*Heuuu... The whole family is invited !* I stammered foolishly, trying to defuse the unbearable pressure.

Thus it was that the Dagenais family crossed my humble threshold. I had prepared my home as best I could, hiding behind a leather curtain the few provisions I had : dried meat, wild berry preserves, a precious cache of tea and maple sugar. On the wall hung devotional prints, bought clandestinely from the Hudson's Bay Company, for Catholic emblems still whispered of forbidden loyalties.

I prayed that my humble nest, simple as it was, might hide the storm of longing, confusion, and fragile hope that churned within me.

In truth, my heart awaited not a chick to warm the nest, but a lovebird — rare, delicate, elusive. Perhaps Augustin could have been that bird, had grief not still held me prisoner. And yet, as the seasons turned, I planted my garden, raised my little stable, and gathered berries with the quiet hope that one day —somehow— a miracle would come.

Through the softened lens of old age, I see now how strange my behavior must have seemed, how absurd my stubbornness. But how

Red River

could I surrender the wild freedom of the prairies, the gallop of horses under the open sky, for the tame, polite prison of a woman's life ?

—*No way !*

Day after day, I deferred the hour of revelation, unwilling to betray the secret that had become my skin. Life had caught me, gently, inexorably, in the trap of my own making.



Chapter 38

Preparing for the Bison Hunt

It was not until the spring of the year of grace 1852 that I was able, at last, to participate in the great buffalo hunt — the noble adventure that had set so many young hearts ablaze. Until then, I had played at hunting, but my faltering balance on horseback rendered me a mere amateur, a shadow among true hunters.

Determined to cast off this shame, I had spent my leisure hours riding bareback across the plains like a madwoman, shooting at targets while at a triple gallop. The neighbors, who judged eccentricity more severely than crime, made wide detours around me, warning their ten or twelve offspring —for such was the generous fecundity of the French Métis— not to venture into the fatal arc of my projectiles.

I had also learned, from the last hunt, half-ruined by a Sioux raid, the first secrets of survival on the Prairie. I could now, like the ancient hunters of legend, place my ear against the lip of a prairie-dog's burrow and, through the earth's warm vibrations, detect the distant thunder of bison herds marching fifty kilometers away.

I knew that these ponderous nations of muscle and breath advanced in straight lines, indifferent to any obstacle save the mountains ; and woe then to the lonely encampment, the careless farm, the solitary tree, crushed or battered by a thousand rubbing flanks suddenly seized with an irresistible itch. Later, it would be by similar laws —by the intrusion of man into these ancient paths— that the buffalo would be wiped from the face of the West, like a dream upon waking.

That year, the bountiful snows of winter, melting in the springtime's passionate embrace, had drunk deep into the clayey humus of the

Red River

Prairie, and under the first caresses of the warm chinook winds, the Plain unfurled like a green ocean, studded with silvered pools.

By the first of June, the fever of the Great Hunt had seized the Métis of Red River. The villages, scattered like nests along the riverbanks, buzzed with the intoxication of preparation.

It was then that, with a trembling heart and a dry throat, I confided my decision to my dear friend Augustin Dagenais :

—Augustin, this year I ride as a true Métis ! My great-grandfather was Algonquin, born of the wild shores of Pointe-Bleue. Do you think... do you think I have the right to hunt ?

He looked at me gravely, weighing my spirit rather than my blood :

—No doubt you have the heart. But you have no family here. If you fall wounded, maimed, there will be none to tend you. It is a dangerous thing, you know !

—And if a Métis without kin falls ? What then ?

—The community takes pity. But his share is meager — he is given scraps, not fattened calves.

—I have lived on lean cows all my life, I replied with a stubborn smile, and I ask for no fattened calves.

I had decided —as I would so often in my life— to follow the stubborn cry of my own will, even when good sense whispered caution. It was my nature; and if it sometimes cast me into sorrow, it also led me into the luminous heart of experience.

Red River

Thus, early June found the villages of the Red River alive with a holy frenzy. Able-bodied men, women, and even wide-eyed children abandoned the safety of their homes, entrusted the care of hearths and fields to the infirm and the old, and hurled themselves with fervor into the preparations for the exodus.

Leather was scraped and mended, moccasins stitched—for it was known that one might wear through a dozen pairs before the season's end—, weapons were cleaned and polished until they shone like river stones, carts groaned under the weight of supplies, and the nearest Hudson's Bay Company post, guarded like a fortress, saw its coffers swell with the credits of the eager Métis.

The English-speaking villages, in their cold indifference, looked on and sneered:

—There they go again — the mad French, abandoning good soil for wild chimeras !

They did not understand—and never would—that in these hunts the Métis spent more strength, skill, and courage than in a whole year's harvest.

In truth, it was a costly adventure. Families invested heavily in weapons, carts, oxen, draught horses, and the precious black powder without which the hunt would fail.

Each expedition consumed mountains of supplies : seven hundred liters of powder, a ton and a half of lead, thousands of butcher knives and flints, and hundreds of horses, brave and uncomplaining, who bore their masters into the furious charge.

The *Hudson's Bay Company*, that jealous monarch of commerce, extended ample credit, for they trusted—and rightly so—the inviolable honor of the Métis. Yet they set their prices as high as the vault of the sky, confident in their monopoly, and collected, at the expedition's

Red River

end, vast quantities of hides and pemmican to feed their legions and to sell abroad at fabulous profits. They were merchants with the heart of misers and the souls of kings.

In company with the leaders of our expedition, I went to the Bishop of St. Boniface, Mgr. Joseph-Norbert Provencher, a grave man who seemed to carry on his shoulders the heavy fate of our scattered nation.

—*Monseigneur*, we said, *"we come to ask for a chaplain to bless our hunt and anoint the dying."*

—*How many souls ?*

—*Four hundred hunters, and more than a thousand carts, Monseigneur.*

—*You are right*, he said, after a moment's solemn reflection. *Such a multitude cannot be sent into peril without the blessing of the Church.*

Thus fortified, we redoubled our preparations. Horses, lean and swift as wolves, were bought and branded. Gunpowder was measured, muskets loaded, axes sharpened to glittering keenness. Ammunition was set aside not only for the hunt but for the unseen perils of the return — for the Sioux, though humbled, were never wholly silent, and the Prairie was a stage on which yesterday's victories could be undone by tomorrow's ambush.

The price of a horse, once fifteen pounds sterling, had not changed in forty years. But for a true prize — a lapelouse, an appaloosa, with hooves of iron and a soul of fire — men would pay up to two hundred and fifty pounds, a fortune beyond imagining for most.

In less than a week, all was ready. And I, standing among the bustling tents and the creaking carts, felt at last that I had entered fully into the ancient and perilous brotherhood of the Hunters of the Plains.

Red River

The old earth whispered beneath my feet, and above me the sky—immense, blue, and terrible—seemed to lean down, as if to watch, and to bless, this bold new chapter of my life.



Chapter 39

Departure for the Great Summer Hunt

By mid-June, as if seized by a grand ancestral summons, the French-speaking villages of the Red River lay deserted of their able-bodied souls. From every hamlet, endless caravans of Red River carts, creaking and groaning under the prodigious strain, set forth at a solemn crawl.

Oxen strained at their yokes; thoroughbreds tossed their manes to the winds ; and a thousand capering dogs, faithful comrades of the chase, bounded about the parade of men and women, boys and girls, who laughed and wept in the radiant confusion of departure.

All converged toward the distant mirage of **Pembina**, shimmering beyond the austere Line.

—Ah, Pembina ! City of all enchantments, cradle of dreams, forge of destinies !

Each convoy resembled some colossal, apocalyptic beast, snorting clouds of dust toward the impassive heavens, its body quivering with the frenzied cries of mad violinists, scraping their instruments until the very air shrieked with discordant joy.

The carts howled on their wooden axles like tortured souls, and the dust—oh, the dust!—rose in cataclysmic billows, so dense and primeval that I fancied myself inhaling the ashes of forgotten multitudes, breathing, within each particle, the breath of our ancient ancestors.

And thus we advanced, too slowly for the taste of the newer European villagers, who leaned against their gates with folded arms and disdainful eyes, muttering as the strange cavalcade rolled past :

—There go the French !

Red River

Infants and women heavy with child sat amid heaps of straw or cradled themselves in the hollowed beds of carts stripped of their benches, swaying gently with the rut-ridden roads of the Prairie.

After the searing memories of Grand-Coteau, I had vowed never again to entrust my fate to an outdated musket. Thus had I, in a moment of impetuous hope, bought from a Montana smuggler a wonder of modernity: a *Colt rifle*, six-shooter, model of 1850, a weapon as elegant as it was lethal. I clutched it like a talisman, my silent companion against the dangers that awaited.

Ah, Pembina ! Capital of the French Métis, crossroads of the American West ! There the hunters of Red River, Saskatchewan, Missouri, the Woodlands and the Cypress Hills gathered like swallows before a grand migration.

At the edge of Pembina stretched a vast encampment : a living city of tents, arranged in solemn circles around a sacred heart. In the center, an immense square opened to the heavens, and around it, ranks of Red River carts formed a jagged palisade, drawbars raised like lances, many bearing the proud *fleur-de-lis* in fluttering defiance to the winds of the Prairie.

Families, long sundered by the pitiless winter, flung themselves into each other's arms. Tears and laughter mingled with the songs of fiddlers and the joyous clamor of children. Births were celebrated, deaths mourned, and romances blossomed with the impetuousness of spring floods.

—*Achille Labonté from Fort-Pierre ! Is it truly you ?*

—*Aurélien Gagnon from Saint-Paul ! What a miracle to see you alive !*

And so the names rang out like the roll call of a vanished world : the Jolicoeurs of Saint-Louis-du-Missouri, the Sanschagrins of Notre-Dame-du-Détroit, the La France of Belle-Fourche, the Debellefeuille of

Red River

Prairie-du-Chien, the Brindamours of Cœur-d'Alene, the Tranchemontagnes of Marais-des-Cygnés, the Vadeboncœurs of Bellefontaine...

Here love was sowed and reaped in the course of a single season ; here widows, wise in sorrow and bold in hope, seized their second breath ; here strangers became kin, bound by nothing more than the sacred breath of the French tongue and the exchange of a puppy or a kitten, as if the bloodlines themselves had woven anew in the loom of affection.

Thus was the good life of a time forever lost, melted into the formless night of the past, alongside the thundering buffalo herds and the creaking carts of Red River. My aged hands tremble, my eyes, blurred by years, weep to remember those days that now seem the golden dreams of another soul.

—*Alexis ! To the Grand'Place ! The elections begin !* cried Albert Gamache, camp town-crier, as he passed me, galloping hard on his sweating mount.

—*I come !* I shouted, leaping onto my faithful appaloosa and racing after him.

In the central square, under the vast and merciless sky, the Great Assembly of free men was held. Each adult male hunter lifted his hand to vote. A **President** was elected to lead the hunt, flanked by twelve **Councillors**, who formed a **Provisional Council**, endowed with full legislative and judicial power — power that would last but as long as necessity demanded.

—*The President must be brave, wise, and beloved*, Albert told me, his voice solemn. *We are free men, we obey because we choose to, as did the Indians, from whose proud mothers we descend.*

It was understood : the leader of the Great Hunt was not always the political leader. How well I would later understand why great *Louis*

Red River

Riel, though a prophet of ideas, would never become a chief of hunters, whereas *Gabriel Dumont* would rise, quick and sure, as a man of action.

The Council appointed a new *town crier*, who would proclaim the laws of the camp. Rodolphe LaBoucane, vigorous and sonorous, replaced Albert. Then came the election of ten *Captains*, each to *lead a platoon of ten men*, each to bear the burden of authority, vigilance, and justice for one solemn day at a time.

—*Captains must have eyes on all sides and feet in none but their own boots !* laughed *Robert Gamache*, jostling a neighbor with rough affection.

Those who would not submit to discipline withdrew to their private affairs. But those who remained pledged themselves to a code as ancient and noble as any chivalry : *to enforce order, to safeguard the camp, to uphold the dignity of the hunt.*

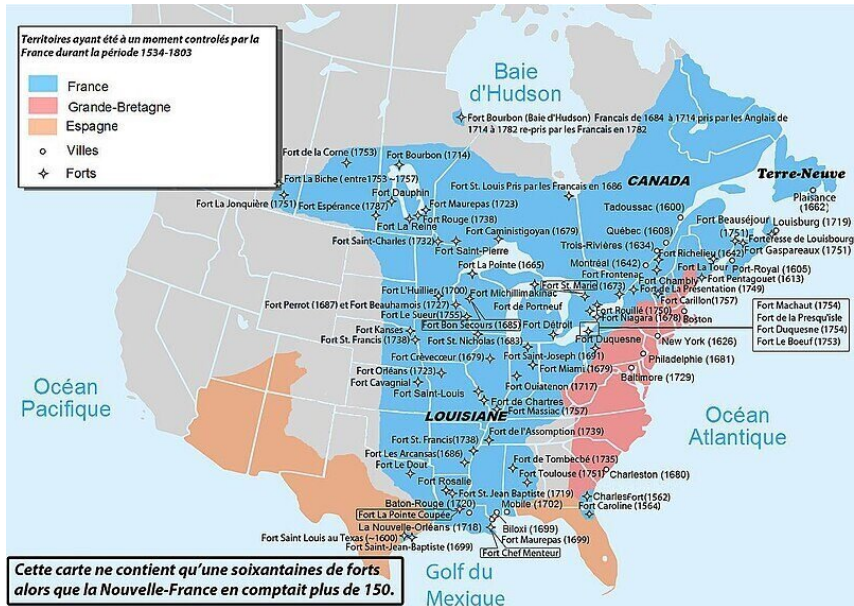
Each Captain chose a *guide*, a seasoned soul who would lead the caravan to fruitful lands without infringing upon the sacred territories of the Sioux, whose wrath could be sudden and terrible. A *fleur-de-lis flag* was hoisted high on the cart of the *Captain of the Day*, and when it was lowered, we knew it was time to encamp, to rest our oxen and water our horses, and to offer our thanks to the Almighty who watched over wanderers on the endless Prairie.

As I stood there, heart beating with happiness I could hardly contain, I marveled at this order born of freedom, this democracy rough-hewn but luminous, this solemn brotherhood beneath the indifferent sky. Here, in the wilds of the New World, had been forged a dream that kings had crushed in Europe : a nation of free men, where law and liberty were born not from decrees, but from the heart of the people themselves.

And how dearly would we pay for it in the years to come !

Red River

Ah! Had we remained thus —brothers in freedom !— perhaps we would not have been broken at Batoche, perhaps the *fleur-de-lis* would still fly free over the wide Prairie, and the rivers would still murmur our French songs to the stars.



Source: Wikipédia.



Chapter 40
The Rules We Make for Ourselves

While the women and girls, like industrious bees, bustled around the linen tents, the boys led our herds of cattle and horses to graze in the lush meadows, not far from the protective circle of wagons.

—*Stay close !* cried the guards of the day shift to the daring young riders who, spirited by youth, longed to gallop beyond the limits of our entrenched camp. Ever and always, the threat of a Sioux surprise loomed over us, like a hawk casting its shadow over a sleeping fawn. It was unlikely, perhaps, but prudence is the vigilant mother of safety.

After the solemn election of our chiefs and their ten-man platoons, the six hundred men of our great Camp gathered in Council beneath the open vault of heaven. There, amidst a sea of eager faces and the murmuring of the wind in the grass, they adopted the sacred regulations : *the Rules* which, alone, could preserve our fragile order and shield us from the anarchy that ever lurks at the edge of human endeavors.

The laws were few, but each was gravened like a commandment.
First: no alcohol, that fomentor of chaos, could defile our encampment.

Second: no hunting on the Lord's Day, when the heavens themselves seemed to lean down to hear our prayers.

Third: immorality and blasphemy were proscribed, though such purity, alas, belonged more to dreams than to the dust of life.

Fourth: no one could depart the circle without Council's leave, lest lone wanderers fall prey to the hidden perils of the Prairie.

Red River

Fifth: and most vital : no hunter might charge the bison herd before the signal was given, for the mad panic of a stampede would ruin all if the slowest riders, mounted on humble nags rather than appaloosas or mustangs, were left behind. Justice demanded unity; one herd, one thunder, one assault.

For a first infraction, the penalty was harsh but just : the offender's saddle and bridle were ceremonially destroyed. A second offense brought graver shame: the confiscation of the offender's leather jacket and a public whipping.

But theft —ah, theft !— was an unforgivable wound to the heart of our brotherhood. The thief was led into the Grand'Place, where, before all the camp, the town crier intoned his shame three times, each repetition heavier and more merciless :

—*Anatole Fournier, thief... Anatole Fournier, thief... Anatole Fournier, thief!*

Yet despite these stern necessities, the evenings glowed with a luminous joy. When dusk spread its violet veils over the meadows, the camp came alive with the music of fiddles and the pounding of dancing feet.

—*Come, Augustin, let's watch the people dance !* I cried, seizing him by the shoulder with the carefree affection of youth.

He came, smiling shyly, and detached himself a little from my grasp, as if fearful that my touch might betray him. Shyness, doubtless !

Thus I whirled away the evenings, dancing *bourrées*, *farandoles*, *jigs* and *square sets* with the girls of the camp, careful never to invite the same one twice, lest I spark in some young heart a flame of dangerous tenderness. À

Red River

Even then, I could read the eloquence of a maiden's gaze : the sudden brilliance that love kindles, making their eyes radiant beyond all earthly jewels.

I quickly discerned how my softer features, my golden brown hair and my eyes sparkled with a rare brilliance, as did the sweet melody of my Québec French —unspoiled by the harshly rolled *r*'s of our Red River cousins— cast around me a faint aura of exotic charm. Unwittingly, I fascinated girls, even though I longed for different favors—the admiration of handsome boys —an inclination that prudence forced me to conceal. For in that stern world, the mere suspicion of my true nature would have closed the circle of opportunity against me, as surely as a trap closes upon a wolf.

Augustin, for his part, danced stiffly and reluctantly, his discomfort plain to see.

—Too bad for him, I thought, laughing inwardly. I shall dance twice as much to make up for it !

At every fleeting kindness, at every innocent brush of hand or shoulder in the communal whirl of dances, some girls' eyes would kindle like summer stars, speaking more plainly than any words could of hopes newly born.

Bolder ones, emboldened by the darkness and the music, sought closer contact still —small signals, small confessions— for it was in these fervent gatherings that eternal loves were sown, leading to weddings, new families, and generations yet unborn who would one day return to dance again at Pembina.

What feasts, what unforgettable balls ! What dreamlike weddings under the open sky, with storytellers spinning legends, singers weaving melodies from Old France and New, fiddlers and drummers whose tireless hands seemed blessed by Bacchus himself ! Truly, for a few seasons, we glimpsed Paradise.

Red River

When night had thickened and the bonfires burned low, the president would walk the great camp's circumference, ringing a bell and calling all to prayer.

—*Victorin, François, Anastase — come ! The evening prayer awaits !* he would say, his voice carrying gently over the whispering grasses.

There, in front of the chaplain's open tent — an altar adorned with the wild blossoms of the Prairie : white anemones, crimson columbines, indigo bellflowers, knapweed roses, orange lotuses— we gathered, hushed and moved, as though touching the hem of the infinite.

Beneath the vault of stars, we knelt and sang the timeless words: the *Act of Adoration*, the *Pater Noster*, the *Ave Maria*, the *Credo*, the *Confiteor* — the ancient Latin rising like a ghostly mist from our fervent lips.

—*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum...*

I, who would later lose my faith in the betrayal and bloodshed of 1885, still recall those nights with tears that neither time nor bitterness can erase. Even the garrulous turtledoves hushed their murmuring to listen.

How could we have known, then, that the storm clouds of 1870 were already massing beyond the horizon, that our little Eden would soon be trampled and lost ?

And yet, even today, if I close my eyes, I can still breathe the mingled perfumes of the Prairie flowers, can still hear the solemn Latin prayers fluttering like faded banners across the Plain of memory.

Red River

At last, after prayer, we kindled smoky fires of boucane⁴³ to drive away the night insects, and drifted one by one into our dreams. Thus ended the last evening of waiting.

Tomorrow, at last, the Great Hunt would begin.



⁴³ Boucane = smoke. Boucaniers used to smoke meat.

Chapter 41
At Last, We Depart !

The final night was but a ghost of a night. Barely had our weary bodies touched the bedding when the reluctant dawn came to wrench us from our dreams, dragging us back to the hard light of duty. The tired moon, embarrassed to be caught lingering, retreated behind the paling clouds like a guilty guest. We stumbled into the fresh morning, faces still furrowed with sleep, to attend the Mass celebrated with solemn majesty upon the Grand'Place, where even the very earth seemed to tremble under the priest's ancient Latin murmurings.

For my part, I could scarcely lift my eyelids. Neither the steaming oatmeal nor the bitter bowl of tea could awaken the embers of my spirit. In his sermon, the Chaplain, his voice both tender and austere, addressed himself more gravely to us hunters :

—Some among you, he said, will not see this same sun descend in glory tonight. Before its setting, your souls may be weighed before the terrible tribunal of the Most High. May your confession, made last night, rise to Him like the sweet fragrance of burnt offerings.

He spoke with such gravity that even the most hardened among us bowed their heads, suddenly very small before the immensity of death. As for me, shame gnawed at my heart, for, despite the crier's fervent exhortations and the stern warnings of the President of the Council, I had given myself with joyous abandon to the intoxicating waltz of the dance.

It must be said: the French Métis, under their rough exteriors, carried a simple and ardent faith, a childlike reverence for God, and a deep, almost superstitious fear of offending Him.

At the chime of six, while the air was still cool and perfumed with dew, the fleur-de-lis flag rose proudly on the cart of one of the day's

Red River

captains, snapping in the morning breeze like a royal summons. The hunt was at last in motion ! To hasten our plunge into the great black seas of bison rumored to darken the plains beyond, we had divided ourselves into five mighty columns, stretched side by side across fifteen hundred meters of prairie.

I rode at the heart of this human river, mounted on Pompon, my spirited appaloosa, whose silver mane streamed like a banner in the wind. Behind me, Augustin, helped by a bevy of laughing girls, coaxed along our four rickety carts, whose every jolt seemed a small miracle of endurance.

I turned in the saddle and tried to grasp the enormity of our host : twelve hundred creaking carts, each drawn by a plodding ox or a high-strung horse, sprawling like a slow-moving fortress across ten kilometers of trembling earth.

Within each column, the carts staggered slightly —this by design— to allow the dust to ascend in smoky banners before choking the next. Such dispersal was no mere matter of comfort; it was survival. Should the dreaded Sioux appear, we could, within half an hour, fold our caravans into an entrenched circle of wagons, a makeshift citadel against the storm. Had we marched in a single thread, stretched thin across ten kilometers, we would have been meat for the wolves before a cry could even be raised.

No sooner had the sun climbed above the trembling grasses than the guide on duty, Anastase Dumont —father to the illustrious Gabriel whose name yet lingers like a heroic song among all French hearts in North America— gave the signal. His column unfurled like a banner in the wind, and the others followed, shaking the Prairie with the rumble of wheels and hooves.

A thousand sounds rose up in a single jubilant roar : the shrieks of children perched precariously on cart-rails, the hysterical neighing of horses drunk on the scent of freedom, the wild barking of lean, fevered

Red River

dogs, already drunk on the anticipated perfume of blood. Commands cracked like whips across the morning air, but all these noises, mortal and vibrant, were instantly swallowed by the great, mad symphony of the wooden axles, those shrieking violins of the Prairie, each bow stroke wailing its harsh melody to the indifferent heavens.

Evening came softly, drawn down like a silken curtain. The encampment, reborn with the ease of long practice, rose again in barely thirty minutes : a fragile city of men, beasts, dust, and dreams, floating like a mirage upon the infinite Plains.



Chapter 42
In Search of the Bison

At the first breath of dawn, while the horizon still smoldered with the ashes of night, our “*discoverers*” returned from their secret wanderings. With the triumphant gestures of heralds, they proclaimed that a herd of bison, immense and shadowy as a dream, had been sighted far to west-northwest.

At once, the camp awoke in a quiver of feverish excitement. The town-crier, spurring his lively pony between the tents, trumpeted the call to arms. Horses, still heavy with the bliss of their brief freedom at pasture, were summoned back with shrill cries. Across the Prairie, a symphony of neighs, impatient snorts, and stamping hooves rose under the awakening sun.

Then, as if stirred by an invisible conductor, hundreds of horsemen blossomed from the camp. Their broad western headdresses flared like banners, their garments glittered with the thousand fiery sparks of colored *rasades*. Beneath them, their mounts danced and pranced, nostrils flaring, ready to hurl themselves into the wild ecstasy of the hunt.

—*Forward !*

At the appointed hour, the guide leapt astride his horse, and like a falcon loosed from the gauntlet, tore ahead. Behind him, the chief unfurled the white *fleur-de-lis* standard — that sacred symbol, clear against the bluing air, calling to mind the ancient banners of royal France, so tenderly anchored in every heart.

Each morning, as the camp roused from its brief repose, the chief of the day would hoist this flag high into the wind, and like a slow awakening giant, our long caravan would fall into its allotted ranks.

Red River

We advanced as a living fortress : a bristling, irresistible engine of men, beasts, and carts. Armed riders, muskets and rifles glittering in the sun, flanked us in scattered lines —vanguard, flank-guards, and rear-guards— each at their station, each ready to strike.

Far ahead galloped our scouts —*les découvreurs*— gallant knights of the prairie. They scoured every fold of land, every coulee, every trembling grove and shimmering pond, wary of ambushes that the tall grasses might conceal. The leeward side, swathed in the thick, suffocating dust thrown up by our passage, was the most vulnerable ; there, veiled riders with scarves over their faces kept an unrelenting watch.

From time to time, a rider would race back towards us, making the V-shaped sign with his arms, shouting across the drifting haze :

—*Nothing to report ! March on !*

Thus, under the deafening symphony of wooden axles, iron hooves, and human clamor, we surged westward like a breathing war machine, capable of crushing anything that dared oppose its path.

Riding beside me, the chaplain, his cassock fluttering like a torn battle-flag, tightened his reins with an iron fist. His eye gleamed mischievously.

—*It feels, he said, as if we were witnessing the columns of Austerlitz, Alexis !*

—*Austerlitz ?* I echoed, naive and curious. *Was he a general ?*

He laughed — that deep, rolling laugh of men who have seen much and remembered more.

—*No ! It was a battle —a great battle— where French valor, under Bonaparte, triumphed over the colossal might of Russia and Austria.*

Red River

—*Ah !* I said simply, feeling the golden echoes of vanished empires stir in my blood.

—*And know this*, he added dreamily, *It is a Bonaparte who now sits in France — President of the Republic, for now. Perhaps, one day, history will again don her imperial mantle...*

He fell silent, his eyes lost in visions of Glory and vanished thrones.

Meanwhile, the younger riders, relieved by the knowledge that vigilance, for now, was in strong hands, surrendered to the bubbling gaiety of youth. A Prairie hare, startled from its refuge, bounded into view — a flash of white and terror.

—*Come, Alexis ! Our supper is escaping !* shouted François, his voice bright with laughter.

At once, a whirlwind of horsemen broke from the column. Cries of wild joy split the air, mingling with the yapping of dogs and the creaking shrieks of cart axles. The horses wove and crossed, describing dizzying arabesques on the boundless canvas of the Plains. It was a frenzied ballet, worthy of Cossack horsemen, a mad farandole of youth and freedom.

Gunshots rang out, startling flocks of unseen birds from the grasses. Often the nimble hare would vanish into its burrow, victorious ; but sometimes, alas, the shots found their mark. I ached for the poor beast — the only soul among us who found no merriment in the chase — but I dared not show it, fearing the mockery reserved for “*little natures*” among these sons of the Prairie.

When a hare fell, I consoled myself by imagining it spirited away to some celestial pastureland, where the carrots grew tall and sweet, and no musket ever barked.

Red River

The revelry continued. Riders leaned from their saddles, snatching up handkerchiefs, hats, even pebbles at full gallop, showing off their dazzling skill. They threw themselves from their mounts at breakneck speed, rolled in the dust, and vaulted back into their saddles in a single, breathless movement.

The girls, peering from the carts, watched with sparkling eyes — part admiration, part secret yearning to join the wild dance themselves.

Augustin, laughing in the tumult, called out to me :

—*Come, Alexis ! Show us your skill !*

—*Waoh ! You just want to kill me, Augustin !* I cried back, feigning terror.

—*No ! I admire your caution. But you are too wise for a youth !*

I smiled sadly.

—*Perhaps. I've seen too many accidents. I have no family left. If I am crippled, who will care for me ?*

—*I will !* Augustin said, almost fiercely. *I swear it !*

—*Until you marry*, I teased.

—*Then your wife will have little pity for a crippled friend not of her blood.*

—*I shall never marry !* he cried, and I thought, perhaps foolishly, that Augustin loved my soul under its rough disguise.

When the leaping and tumbling grew tedious, the youth took to cablessing — the art of throwing the lasso. Our *cable*, born from Mexican ranchos, had become the proud companion of the Métis-French. Some,

Red River

rare prodigies, even hunted bison with it — though such feats were whispered of like legends.

Thus, the hours melted away under the joyous sun. Behind the solemn plod of the oxen and carts, the horizon shimmered with the reckless capers of youth ; before us, beyond the veil of heat and dust, the armed riders, vigilant and grave, scoured the landscape for signs of the great herds, and the dangers that shadowed them.



Chapter 43
Heatwave-Break

After three or four hours of arduous marching under the tyrannical reign of the sun, when the air itself seemed to quiver and the blood boiled beneath our skin, when the Prairie swarmed with voracious flies, monstrous mosquitoes, and legions of ravenous ants, we would halt at the first welcoming pool of water.

As if freed from an invisible yoke, each carter unhitched his beasts — oxen and horses alike — to let them drink deep the trembling silver of the pond. Fires of thick, acrid smoke were hastily lit, unfurling their ashen banners to drive back the swarming pests and to warm the cherished tea, that sovereign beverage which *the British East India Company* had succeeded in making as indispensable to the Métis and Indians as the sacred hart-rouge tobacco.

Then came the pipe. Ah, what voluptuous pleasure ! What divine silence when the wooden axles, whose howling had battered our ears since dawn, were at last muzzled ! In that brief truce, the *tourtes* —the tireless doves of the plains— resumed their shrill, incessant cackling :

"Toute ! Toute ! Toute !"

What endless chatter must they have exchanged in the hidden theatres of the trees !

During these pauses, no true entrenchments were raised. The wagons, however, arranged themselves into a loose circle — a sleeping serpent ready to coil itself at the first alarm. At once, the day-scouts, proud silhouettes against the molten sky, spurred their mounts toward the nearest hills, compelling the horizon to confess all its secrets and betray any lurking enemy. By silent, ritual signals they told us that all was clear, that life was still sweet and danger still sleeping.

Red River

Thus reassured, we surrendered to the twin delights of a hearty meal and a slumberous rest.

The pots and provisions were swiftly unloaded. Fires were kindled carefully, for a single spark could summon a catastrophe across the dry, trembling Prairie. Before each family's tent, a pit was dug and lined with stones to contain the blaze. Above it, a tripod of poles was erected, from which hung the blackened kettles soon exhaling the perfumes of hunted game —wild ducks, Prairie hens, simmering pemmican— and other rustic delicacies of the French Prairie.

Women kneaded dough with their bare arms gleaming with flour, while men seasoned their soups and broths with the grave deliberation of old warriors seasoning their council words. Children darted like minnows through the grass, their laughter rising into the stifling air.

I, for my part, needed not to cook, having boarded for a modest fee with the Guèvremont family of Prairie-du-Rocher. *"It is good, I mused, to walk the world unburdened by the cares of a family."*

After dining on the tender grass, stretched in lazy groups —sometimes by blood, sometimes by friendship, sometimes by parish — we surrendered to a well-earned nap. The Prairie herself seemed to drowse with us, her great chest heaving under the furnace of the noonday sun.

It was only when the light softened and the oxen's bellies were heavy that the call to depart stirred once more among us, around the hour of two or three.

The convoy resumed its progress. Long, snaking columns crept again over the Prairie, raising ephemeral mountains of dust. Amid this spectral haze, the young riders performed feats of daring and wild artistry under the watchful, secret gaze of the girls — who pretended indifference while missing nothing.

Red River

—*We are approaching the Cypress Mountains*, said Augustin one day, bringing his warm, calloused hand to the back of my neck and tilting my face closer to his.

It had become his custom to do so, to pierce the uproar of hooves, wheels, and human voices that thundered about us. His breath brushed against my cheek, carrying his words like clandestine caresses. And in that cloud of dust, cloaking us in anonymity, an insane impulse seized me — the urge to press my lips against his perfectly cut mouth. But I stifled it. A single reckless kiss would have shattered the delicate fiction of my disguise, would have torn away the veil that hid my true nature from him. Better silence, better longing, than revelation.

The afternoon marches dragged on another three or four hours, measured by the slow beating of hooves and the deep, burning thirst that no water could quench. Eventually, a pond or spring would mercifully appear, shimmering like a mirage on the cracked earth, and our leaders would raise the signal.

At the flutter of the white *fleur-de-lis*, the convoy broke formation, and in less than half an hour the entrenched camp, our faithful fortress, rose again upon the Prairie.

Thus had we combed twenty-five kilometers of grassland — and not a bison worthy of a true hunt had deigned to cross our path. Only scattered, timid herds, fit to mock rather than sustain us.

While the multitude —men, women, children, nearly fifteen hundred souls— set about building the camp, a quieter drama unfolded apart from the noise, the smells of roasting meat, the cries of the young. The Provisional Council —President, Councillors, Captains, Guides, Commander-in-Chief— assembled their Executive, Legislative, and Judicial bodies on the withered grass of the Prairie. A circle within the circle, a republic under the indifferent heavens.

Red River

From a discreet distance, I watched them. Their rifles lay within easy reach ; their pipes sent thin blue serpents into the sky. They spoke gravely of the day's affairs : infractions judged, penalties decided, the morrow's route plotted according to the scouts' auguries.

They governed, not with parchment and seals, but with memory, custom, and the trembling authority of men who knew that out here, on the edge of the world, law was no more substantial than the dust we stirred.



Chapter 44
The Stampede

The days of searching stretched long and weary, as if time itself had grown sluggish under the pitiless sun. That year of 1852, it took ten grueling days to find our quarry. Ten days of traversing the vast, indifferent Prairie, where the ground undulated in gentle hills like the frozen swell of some ancient sea. Ten days of sifting the horizon with desperate eyes, like shipwrecked mariners scanning for land. Ten days during which the laughter of children faded into whimpers, and the faces of men grew gaunt with fatigue.

Two hundred and fifty kilometers of exile from hope.

And then —on the eleventh dawn— a breath of miracle : a thin, shimmering column of dust rose on the farthest rim of the world, trembling like a celestial omen.

—Dust column to the northwest... André Morin, Jules Thibault, Anastase Bélanger — ride !

The captain on duty dispatched his scouts almost perfunctorily, as if afraid to rouse false hopes. But the scouts, spirited by the same hunger that gripped us all, vanished at a gallop toward the mysterious signal.

Soon they returned, eyes ablaze, their horses lathered with sweat : *a herd !* A vast, uncountable multitude, grazing idly, ignorant of the cataclysm about to befall them. One bold bull, eager for a mate, had betrayed them by his ardent chase — and thus heralded his doom.

We halted, our fivefold convoy drawing to a slow halt two or three kilometers from the herd. Our leader, glass to his eye, scanned the black ocean of moving backs that carpeted the horizon. Murmurs of

Red River

thanksgiving rippled through the ranks. At the shrill cry of the town-crier, we assembled before the front line, solemn and ready. Even the chaplain, austere and robed in the gravity of the hour, came to bless us with Latin formulas whose very obscurity heightened their sacred force :

—*In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen !*

The priest's voice mingled with the low sigh of the Prairie wind, a benediction lost in immensity. Around me, hardened hunters bowed their heads. I alone remained unconfessed, and a sharp thorn of guilt pierced me.

I was no stranger to the arts of the hunt; I had trained tirelessly, learning to reload a rifle at full gallop, to lean low and fire true amid chaos. My skill, modest though it was, earned friendly jests :

—*You'll soon be a perfect Métis !*

The women and remaining men, too frail or essential to the camp's defense, prepared the carts : half of the twelve hundred would trail the hunters, ready to collect the spoils of this savage harvest. The Sioux lurked always in our minds — a shadow that might, at any moment, seize our exposed possessions.

At last, a long, slow command : the captain lifted his hand, and the entire line moved forward at a measured walk, the horses' hooves muffled by the grass. Regulations forbade overtaking the leader ; a premature rush would ruin the charge.

We advanced thus in a sacred silence. Before us, the herd loomed like a living continent, a trembling plateau of humps and bristling manes. Some buffalo, sensing the dread in the air, raised their snub-nosed heads, blinking stupidly at the sun.

Red River

The hunters halted at a signal. They dismounted ; they circled around the chaplain. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper as we murmured :

—Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name ; Thy kingdom come ; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

Sacred powder horns passed from hand to hand. Mouths were filled with leaden slugs ; rifles were primed ; resolve was steeled.

We remounted in silence. No saddles, no stirrups, nothing but the nerve and balance of the rider. Horses tugged violently at their reins, nostrils flaring, blood dripping from tortured mouths as they strained against human restraint. My Pompon —my noble appaloosa— quivered like an arrow poised on the bow.

Slowly, solemnly, we edged closer to the black tide —the “*obstinacy*”— of bison.

And then —O fury ! O apocalypse !— the great patriarch of the herd, old and wise, caught the scent of doom. His massive head reared skyward ; a snort of rage and terror blasted from his nostrils.

The alarm raced through the herd like wildfire.

The nearest bison bucked and whirled, smashing into their neighbors. Panic ignited in a chain reaction of brute instinct, a living tempest that surged and bellowed across the Prairie.

The stampede was unleashed.

The black sea convulsed, and we, the hunters, plunged into its churning heart at a triple gallop. Dust stormed around us, blotting out the sun ; the earth itself shook beneath the tempest of hooves. The scene was a vision from Revelation: an ocean of beasts thundering beneath a sky of fire.

Red River

My Pompon needed no urging. He hurled himself forward, ears flat, mouth foaming with the intoxication of speed, blood, and gunpowder. I bent low against his side, a living shadow, my rifle ready.

Bullets cracked through the dust like lightning. Hunters shouted, cursed, prayed. From amidst the dust and chaos, I spotted a sleek female buffalo — precious prize among the coarse-muscled bulls.

I tightened my knees, leaned precariously far over Pompon's flank, aimed at the shadow behind her shoulder, and fired.

The shot cracked through the howl of the wind. The bison staggered, collapsed in a somersault of flesh and bone. A green scarf, weighted with stone, flew from my hand to mark the fallen.

Another buffalo, another deadly dance : pressure on the reins, a desperate thrust through the surging herd, a second shot. Another green scarf. My heart hammered not with fear but with a savage, exultant joy.

Around me, the hunters performed miracles of courage and horsemanship. Some clung to their mounts while reloading at full gallop ; others leaned so low that they brushed the very humps of the fleeing beasts.

The world was a chaos of screams, detonations, and the sickening crash of bodies striking bodies. Some hunters were thrown, swallowed by the tide of thundering hooves. The scent of blood and gunpowder clogged the lungs; the very air seemed to burn.

Then — catastrophe !

An unseen bison, panic-blind and brutal, struck me from the saddle. I flew, weightless, for an endless second, before the earth rose up and smashed me down. The impact wrenched the breath from my chest ; the sky spun; darkness licked at the edges of my vision.

Red River

As consciousness ebbed, I glimpsed, through the swirling dust, the monstrous shadows of a thousand buffalo thundering toward me, their massive hooves poised to crush the frail, broken figure I had become.

And then—oblivion.



Bison meat was cut into thin strips and hung on horizontal poles or laid flat on the grass. When the meat was dry, it was ground to a fine dust and mixed with rendered fat to make pemmican. [Priv.Coll.]

Red River

Chapter 45

Injured

Long afterward, I was roused by a caress so light, so silken, that for a brief instant I thought myself transported to the threshold of Paradise. I opened my eyes. No, it was not an angel bending over me — but the gentle, satiny face of a young girl, trembling with shame and tenderness.

— *What is happening?* I murmured, my voice a ghost of itself.

The girl recoiled, crimson to her ears, and stammered :

— *A fly... yes, a fly... was bothering you... on your lips... I dared to touch you, only to drive it away... Forgive me ! I was assigned to care for you. I didn't mean to wake you !*

— *You did well, Geneviève,* I whispered with a faint smile. *Thank you for watching over me.*

It was Geneviève Goulet, a luminous presence I remembered from festive dances under the wide Prairie skies. Instinctively, I checked : neither my shirt nor my jacket had been disturbed.

— *I have such a pounding in my head... Would you have a decoction, by chance ?*

— *Of course ! But wouldn't a poultice be even better ?* she suggested, her eyes shining with mischief.

— *No, no ! No poultice, please ! I loathe them.*

Red River

God alone knew where she might have dared to apply such a remedy, and I did not care to tempt fate further.

She smiled with a mock sigh :

—*Very well, obstinate patient. A decoction it shall be ! You are, after all, the one suffering.*

—*Tell me... what happened ?*

—*Your horse stumbled — a prairie dog burrow, or perhaps the bones of some ancient buffalo. You fell hard. It is a miracle you weren't crushed beneath the wheels or trampled by the stampede.*

—*I was clumsy. I only managed to bring down two bison...*

—*You are not alone. The ground was treacherous. Five hunters were wounded today — no deaths, thank Heaven! Six horses were injured, and one killed outright by an enraged bull. Twenty-five riders met the same fate as you, their mounts sinking into badger holes or ancient bison graves.*

I felt my shame ease a little. I tried to sit up, but she laid a firm hand on my shoulder.

— *Stay still, Alexis. I will take care of your decoction — and keep my scandalous poultices for others.*

With a playful pout, Geneviève opened a leather pouch, drawing from it a handful of powdered *white willow bark*. She sprinkled it into a small iron pot and set it to boil, her delicate hands moving with the grace of a priestess tending sacred flames.

Outside, the dust of battle had settled. Before us stretched a veritable *field of the slain* — the fallen buffalo lay strewn across the Prairie

Red River

like the casualties of some Homeric war, thirty meters apart, a vast tide of life stilled by death. Flags, scarves, and pennants marked each hunter's claim upon the sacred harvest.

Already the women, swift and deft, were at work. Their cutlasses flashed like sunbeams, quartering the immense beasts, loading the precious meat onto ox-drawn carts. In all, I later learned, *1,400 buffalo* had been brought low that day.

The emptied carts raced back to the camp, their absence leaving dangerous gaps in the palisade. The Métis, wise in war, knew that even a moment's weakness could invite disaster. Guards patrolled ceaselessly; the wounded horses were tended with reverence ; and in the council tent, the elected chiefs sat in judgment, settling disputes with the solemnity of a Court of Law.

As for me, my two buffalo were allotted without protest. Geneviève, laughing, set to work slicing them into long, thin strips, spreading them on wooden poles like laundresses airing linens in a summer breeze.

Beside us, a quarrel broke out : two hunters, *Albert Archambault* and *Pierre LaFrance*, each claiming the same buffalo. Witnesses were called; a faded scarf found near the beasts; a stray shot remembered. I turned to Geneviève :

— *They'll be arguing till nightfall.*

— *Bah ! They'll probably list it among the Courses libres [Free Runs],* she said lightly.

— *Courses libres ?*

— *Yes. Game set aside for the widows, the poor, and the unmarried. A gesture of generosity... and survival.*

Her face grew serious :

Red River

—Solidarity is our lifeblood. We cannot rely on the Hudson's Bay Company — they trade only where profit flows. Justice, not charity, must be our law. We take from the haves, to preserve the have-nots. Otherwise, Alexis, we die alone.

I admired her more with every word. These women, hardened and glorified by necessity, wielded their knives and their ideals with the same fierce grace.

By mid-afternoon, the camp hummed like a great living hive. The tongues, humps, and *dépouilles* —the choicest cuts— were deftly extracted, the rest carved into perfect slices for drying : *sixty centimeters wide, a meter and twenty long, and barely six millimeters thick*. The prairie wind, hot and pure, did the rest.

The town-crier's voice rang out :

— It is forbidden to gallop windward of the drying meat!

Our best hunters, flushed with pride, had killed eight, even ten buffalo each. Younger boys scurried about gathering firewood, chasing away opportunistic dogs who, in their cunning, needed no lessons on the scent of blood.

When the meat dried to the texture of bark, Geneviève gathered my share, reduced it to a fine powder with a heavy mallet, and mixed it with molten buffalo fat. Together we poured the seething mixture into leather skins — each fifty-liter sack, a lifeline through the coming winter.

—Be careful, she warned, never to mix male meat with female. The males are too pungent.

Some women, more ambitious, added berries of *Pembina* [pain béni] or wild piths to perfume their pemmican. Without these, the sustenance was bland — a salvation for the body, not the spirit.

Red River

Each heavy sack was called *un taureau* — and could be preserved for years, so long as it was kept cool and dry.

When August burned across the plains, and the last buffalo hides were packed away, our grand caravan broke apart into smaller columns, each bound for its village. I had killed but eight buffalo — not a poor showing for my first great hunt, but I hungered for more.

Behind us, the white merchants of the *Hudson's Bay Company* rubbed their hands with glee. They had risked nothing, yet reaped the riches of our labor : dried meat, hides, pemmican — all at prices of their own choosing.

As for the bones, we left them to bleach beneath the sun. Only years later, after the herds had vanished and the iron horse crossed the Prairie, did desperate Indians gather them by the million, selling them for a pittance to Eastern magnates who built fortunes on their sorrow.

All was well — for the white men.

We returned to *Rivière-aux-Rats* in triumph. There were dances, feasts, and songs beneath the star-flung heavens. In those years, the bounty of the buffalo outweighed all the toil of the settlers' fields.

Often, when the Red River, moody and capricious, swallowed their crops, it was to us, the Métis, they came, begging our generosity to stave off hunger.

But not once — no, *not once* — did they offer the same when fortune's wheel turned against us.



Chapter 46

The Ups and Downs of Love and Romance

In the tumultuous theater of my Western life, I discovered that the Indians, too, pursued the mighty buffalo by myriad stratagems. One of the most dramatic was to drive the herds, in a mad stampede of terror, over sheer cliffs — the *piskun*, as they called it.

But in the somber 1860s, when the bison grew scarce and their hoofbeats no longer shook the Prairies as in the time of the grandfathers, visions came to the shamans : dreams in which the offended Manitou, cloaked in the mists of another world, warned them that these bloody massacres would call down a terrible punishment.

If they persisted in their wanton slaughters —whether by the cliff or by the snare— the Manitou would erase the buffalo from the face of the earth. Alarmed, they began to kill more sparingly, one by one, as we French-Métis had long practiced. But their repentance came too late: the Manitou had turned his face away, and the roaring guns of the white settlers completed the desolation, lest their wheat and rye be trampled under the holy feet of the ancient herds.

Before my steps brought me to the banks of the Red River, the riches of the West — the silken pelts of beaver and marten — flowed like a river toward the East, to Montréal, and then across the sea to London. But *the cruel exactions of the Hudson's Bay Company, that merchant sovereign in whose court there was neither justice nor mercy, drove us to rebel.*

We turned our hopes southward, toward that nameless and turbulent land the Americans called the United States. There, in a freer market, our furs fetched honest prices. Thus, the stream of commerce, once dutiful to London, was treacherously diverted toward St. Paul, and

Red River

thousands of carts, rumbling like distant thunder, crossed the border to defy the HBC monopoly. These "smuggling convoys" grew like a river in flood, until in the year 1873, the first steamboats appeared upon the Red, and a few years later, in 1877, the iron serpent of the railway hissed its way into Saint-Boniface-La Fourche [The-Forks].

In that fateful spring of 1854, as the great buffalo hunt loomed and we awaited the parish priests' call to assemble at Pembina, my dear friend Augustin Dagenais bent toward me one day, and with a furtive glance and a voice low as the rustle of wheat before the wind, whispered :

—Alexis ! A smuggling convoy is forming for St. Paul's. Will you come with me ?

Always eager for the taste of distant roads, I dropped my worn pipe of *hart rouge* —that vile weed which had long since stained my teeth the color of old ivory— swatted away two insolent flies that buzzed drunkenly about me, and smiled a smile that was perhaps more tender than I intended :

—With you, my friend, I would go to the ends of the earth !

At these words, Augustin blushed like the scarlet poppies that tremble on the prairie wind. His gaze darted anxiously about, as though fearing that the very grasses would betray the confession that hung between us.

Ah, our friendship ! — that strange and delicate flower ! I, who at twenty-two had seen enough sorrow to wear the veil of mourning in my soul, had grown attached to him beyond all reckoning. And he, poor Augustin, gentle and awkward, seemed to return my feelings with a sweetness all the more touching for his inexperience. Though our gestures were always chaste, there was an ineffable current between us — a silent accord that no words had yet dared name.

Red River

On the thirteenth of May, the day of my birth, we decided to celebrate — if such an exiled soul as mine could still speak of celebration. We sought refuge in a modest tavern at La Fourche, nestled close to the ruins of Fort-Rouge. There, amidst hanging gardens and the languorous scent of wildflowers, I steeled my heart to speak.

As the coffee-woman pounded roasted beans with a wooden mallet in the shadows, I, trembling inwardly, unfolded to Augustin my hope for a future shared between us. I confessed that though the ghost of my lost Rémi still haunted my dreams, I wished — if only with a shy and wounded hope — to bind my fate to his.

At first he listened, grave and silent, as though fearing to breathe and shatter the fragile miracle of my confession. But after a few cups of rough local beer had warmed his bashful heart, I saw a change in him ; the mist rising in his eyes, the rapture trembling on his lips. He leaned toward me, the words tumbling out in a breathless cascade :

—I knew you loved me ! I knew it ! But I dared not believe... I feared to hope... I waited for you to tell me, lest I lose you forever...

—But why, Augustin ? I asked softly. Why did you keep silent ?

—Because nothing in this world is ever certain. Not even love.

—And yet I dared to speak, I murmured. Now nothing will be as before.

—We shall give each other all the tenderness that life denied us ! he exclaimed, and seized my hand with a trembling ardor.

Alas ! His cheeks, already flushed with hope, deepened to a crimson fever as his timid gaze rose to meet mine. Then, driven by a sudden and irrepressible impulse, he leaned closer, kissed my hand with an abandon that would have been comic had it not been so heart-wrenching — and burst into tears.

Red River

—*It's wonderful ! Wonderful ! I love you madly !*

—*Wonderful!* I repeated, letting the word flutter from my lips like a lost bird... *We must go to your father — we must ask his blessing — we must marry !*

At these words, Augustin froze as if struck by lightning. His eyes widened in horror; his mouth gaped in dumb astonishment. Then, with the violence of a wounded animal, he seized the collar of my plaid shirt and tore it open — and beheld the frail and unmistakable truth of my being.

— *Tabarnouche... Batoche de tabarnouche... Never... Never would I have thought...*

The poor boy collapsed, weeping and hiccupping into his hands. As for me, I too wept — for the death of our fragile dream.

We sat there for long moments, adrift in a silence thick with sorrow. Then, recovering myself, I leaned toward him and pleaded :

—*Augustin, forget what you have seen. Let it be buried forever in your heart.*

But alas — the secret once revealed had already fled like a bird startled from its nest.

He had not known. He had not guessed — until that fatal instant — that I was a girl.



Chapter 47
With the Smugglers

A few days after that grotesque and heart-rending episode, in the melancholy year of 1854, when all my tender illusions of matrimony, wherein the good and handsome Augustin Dagenais played the luminous hero, had crumbled like a pastry fallen from the oven of hope, he once more extended to me a brotherly hand.

No longer lovers —only faithful companions— we would remain bound by a friendship purified of its fever and, perhaps, made more enduring by the ruins of a collapsed passion.

It was at that time that two thousand carts, like a slow and rebellious tide, prepared to descend from the banks of the Rivière Rouge toward Saint Paul, in Minnesota. We sought to escape the odious customs imposed by the British Hudson's Bay Company — that greedy despot, who, beneath a merchant's mask, legislated prices so miserably low for our fine furs and noble pemmican that only rebellion could preserve our dignity.

When the merchant becomes the tyrant, smuggling becomes a duty and the last honor of the free man.

As usual, Pembina, that forgotten post on the threshold of a nascent America, served as the gathering place. It stood just beyond the reach of British Law, since the 49th parallel had, by treaty, severed the Company's grasp.

Thus, we prepared our clandestine caravan — a colossal, serpentine procession of 2,000 Red River carts, creaking and sighing across hills and plains, winding for over a month and 700 kilometers of

Red River

powdered tracks, like some immense, exiled creature dragging its wounded body across the endless Prairie.

Rain turned the earth into a voracious mire, seizing wheels and hooves in a grip of tenacious clay. The furious Rouge River, swollen beyond its banks, betrayed us with sudden floods, washing away paths and hope alike.

When trapped in the mud's embrace, we unloaded our carts, stone by stone filled the ruts, and reloaded our treasures, inching forward under the cruel and mocking gaze of the elements. We advanced no more than twenty-five kilometers a day ; and the voyage stretched, like a penance, well beyond a single lunation.

—*En Avant !* cried the newly elected President of the Council, hoisting aloft the *fleur-de-lis* banner, that faded flower of our ancient France, yet ever fragrant in the heart.

We rose at the first quiver of dawn, when night still clung stubbornly to the earth and the owl retired to its hollow, ceding the sky to the laboring grouse. The morning march was arduous, the heat of the zenith drove us to shelter, and when the burning light declined, we set off once more, until the stars, like sympathetic witnesses, shimmered over our bivouacs.

Around us, the infernal clamor of carts—their wheels screaming like souls in torment—filled the air with a din so savage it swallowed conversation. Words could only be whispered into the shell of an ear, gestures became the new grammar of our days.

Augustin, with his old mischievous tenderness, would grasp my head between his hands, slide his nose beneath my battered flat-brimmed hat, and bellow his confidences into my ear, heedless of my gender, yet full of genuine camaraderie.

Red River

Rivers too unruly for fording were conquered by floating carts, or by rafts hurriedly cobbled together, or by precarious bridges made of felled trunks. We Métis, proud and pragmatic, traveled in brigades of ten carts, each guarded by well-armed sentinels.

Augustin and I, bold and independent, led six carts — two of which bore my modest fortunes in skins, pemmican, and precious beadwork, stitched under long winter moons.

Above us, the sky quivered under the wings of screeching tourtes, and the dust of our convoy, rising in grey banners, threatened to choke even the most resilient lungs. Our cayuses pulled lighter loads, while the great Charolais oxen dragged the heavier burdens across the Prairie's endless vastness.

What did we carry ? Silken furs, dressed buffalo hides, pemmican pressed with the ancient strength of the hunt, embroidered leathers — the pride of our hands. And what did we bring back ? The forbidden treasures of the South : nails, metal, alcohol, tobacco, guns, gunpowder, cloth — all the instruments of life that London forbade us to forge, to keep us shackled to their coffers.

The cattle and fresh horses, destined for trade, walked beyond the dust swirls, on the windward side of the march, like spectral outriders in the distance.

We women were many among the smugglers, and our carts, in a burst of feminine defiance, blossomed with painted flowers, bright friezes, and stars. I decorated mine, but with moderation, fearing the jealous tongues that lash harder than the wind.

Our course followed the meandering *Rouge River*, clung to the *Bois-de-Sioux*, skirted the *Coteaux-des-Prairies*, and embraced the *Saint Pierre River* — now forgotten under the name of Minnesota River.

Red River

—It is in a bend of this river that the village of Saint-Pierre lies, Augustin told me, his face shaded beneath his broad hat. It was there, three years ago, that the Treaty of Sioux Crossing was signed.

—A treaty ? I asked, curiosity stirring against my fatigue.

—A peace treaty between the Dakota Nation and the Federal Government — or the mockery of one. The Dakota yielded to white settlers millions of acres for gold that has never yet been paid.

And he laughed, that bitter laugh born of sorrow too old for tears.

—Before the whites came, he added, quoting an old Blackfoot chief, we had the land and the white man had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them again, they had the land — and we had the Bible.

I laughed too, but in my heart, a shadow passed, darker than any cloud upon the Prairie.

At Saint-Pierre, we paused —but only briefly. From afar, our convoy could be seen, heard, and even smelled. Dust and noise were our betrayers. If the HBC customs officers never ambushed us before we crossed the US border, it was thanks to the large number of rifles that bristled up the convoy like a porcupine ready for battle.

No one dared attack us. The grim determination of Métis men and women, was a more potent warning than any treaty.

—He who plays with fire gets burned, Augustin cried, brandishing his musket with boyish bravado.

We Métis knew how to fight — and we proved it at Grand-Coteau against the Sioux, as we would again in 1885 against Middleton's regiments. Oh yes, I was there — I saw with my own eyes the Métis banners streaming in the wind of rebellion, our muskets roaring against

Red River

polished bayonets, our hearts blazing with an ancient flame. In fact, Macdonald's government provoked us to revolt by refusing to grant us land concessions.

The Hudson's Bay Company, crafty and cruel, once tried to crush us by hiring Swiss mercenaries — the famous Régiment des Meurons — but greed defeated cruelty. The Swiss cost more than the smugglers themselves, and the HBC, grumbling, watched its mercenaries return to Europe, some deserting forever on the fertile banks of the Rouge.

Thus passed our days among the smugglers —in hardship, in laughter, in dust and danger— like an epic sung without end, under the indomitable sky of the Prairie.



Flag of the Meuron Swiss Regiment. This regiment served under English command to subdue the Métis into submission to the full and complete will of the *British Hudson Bay Company*, which belonged to the London aristocracy. Swiss cantons thus sold regiments to England, enabling wealthy Swiss to avoid paying taxes. For the sake of public order, England refused to impose Conscription on the English population. Only men in debt, thieves, criminals, the homeless, troublemakers or those unable to pay taxes or produce a certain sum of money were drafted. But these “soldiers” deserted as soon as possible, and had to be stationed in isolated garrisons (islands or Gibraltar).

The Conflagration of the Prairie

It was a Wednesday, beneath the immense, unbroken vault of the summer sky, that I slept, entwined like a child in Rémi's arms — that beloved presence who, by day, had become the very marrow of my being and who, by night, could not tear himself from the sanctuary of our shared breath, so that my dreams were peopled only by his gentleness, his strength, his living soul.

The murmur of the wind against the canvas lulled us still, when all at once a rending cry — a cry as though torn from the bowels of the earth itself — shattered our slumber.

—Fire ! Fire !... Prairie fire from the northwest !

The smugglers' alarm clove the air with its terror. Augustin, leaping from our tent like a man struck by lightning, stood for a moment stunned, then shouted:

—Quick, Alexie ! A counter-fire !

I, still heavy with sleep and love, stared at him in bewilderment.

—A counter-fire ? I repeated, my voice hollow.

—Yes — to leeward ! he cried. *We must burn the prairie ourselves, else we shall perish in its wrath !*

Already the captain of the day, that tireless guardian of our fate, had rallied his men. Ten torches were thrust into the sea of dry grass. In a breathless instant, flames rose, serpentine and golden, hissing against the wind like the tongues of fallen angels. In ten minutes, a vast,

Red River

blackened circle formed around our convoy; and into this charred sanctuary we drove our wagons, our cattle, and the fragile treasures of our contraband.

Then, like the furious army of a vengeful god, the real fire came — a wall of living flame that roared across the Prairie, devouring all in its path — and when it reached our scorched refuge, it recoiled, it gasped, it died, as though unable to comprehend that death could be its master.

Our moccasins, blackened with soot, bore the marks of that narrow escape, and perhaps it was such days as this that gave to the Black-foot tribe its enigmatic name — warriors born of fire, hardened by the ashes of their world.

—Lightning, too, can strike the grass dry and trembling under the storm Augustin said, his voice low beneath the wind that still carried the stench of burning, *and set the whole earth ablaze.*

—And can nothing be done ? I asked.

—Nothing! he said. *That is why no metal crosses the frame of our Red River carts — not a single nail, not a single chain — for metal calls down the fire of Heaven itself.*

Metal, that cursed and coveted material, was forbidden to us, imported at outrageous cost from the workshops of distant England, where colonial law had strangled the birth of any native industry across the Empire. Our carts, built solely with wood and love, floated on rivers, repaired themselves along the trail, and defied storms.

Yet the Prairie fires were not all the work of God. Sometimes, human cunning was the match. The Indians, in their desperate wisdom, set fire to the fields to herd the buffalo into their fatal enclosures. Later, as the great herds dwindled and fled northward, American hunters, ruthless as any storm, burned the plains to corral what little life remained,

Red River

keeping the wild spirit of the buffalo imprisoned in their wintering grounds.

And we, the French Métis, borne from the marriage of two worlds, met these calamities with a shrug, a smile, a song. Like our fathers, the *coureurs-de-bois*, who had sung under the knife of winter and the lash of the storm, we carried the seed of resilience in our blood.

But if the fires were terrible, the human scourge was worse. The *British Hudson's Bay Company*—that greedy colossus draped in the garments of civilization—unleashed upon us its mercenaries, its hired thugs, its corrupted agents, wolves in the uniforms of law, who, without warrant or cause, stormed our villages, pillaged our pemmican, seized our furs, and defiled the simple sanctity of our homes. They ruled not with Justice but with plunder, believing that the French-speaking Métis could be broken like cattle.

It was their failure to break us—their humiliation at our unyielding spirit—that hastened the great fraud of 1870, when England, weary of a colony it could not tame, sold *Rupert's Land* to Canada for a huge amount of money, in a swindle so vast that it beggared belief, a swindle whose price was paid by the Canadian people themselves, borrowed at usurious rates from the very bankers of England.⁴⁴

But of all this I knew little then. We pressed onward through the charred Prairie, dragging our blackened wheels toward the town that shone on the horizon like a mirage : St. Paul.

Ah, St. Paul ! How my heart, foolish and full of yearning, had imagined another Québec, another Montréal rising from the wilderness, with spires and stone houses and the song of bells ringing through ancient

⁴⁴ It was as if ESSO and SHELL sold Saudi Arabia's oil fields to the Saudis after extracting their oil.

Red River

streets ! But what I found was a child-town, raw and brash, born of the smoke of trade and the thirst for gold.

Above the river, a fortress of gray stone brooded against the horizon : *Fort Saint-Antoine* — renamed *Fort Snelling* by its American keepers, a bastion of conquest and ambition.

—*And that church ?* I asked a townsman.

—*Saint Paul's*, he said. *Named for the Apostle... and for the town itself.*

American flags whipped in the harsh wind, thirty-one stars blazing with the insolence of a rising empire.

—*And Minnesota ?* I asked.

—Soon, soon, the man said. *Minnesota shall be the next star.*

I spoke with a German settler, whose soul still bled from the old tyrannies of Europe. He told me how German princes sold their sons into English armies, how the fields of the Empire were sown not with wheat but with human bodies, traded like cattle across the seas. That was the very reason for his emigration.

—*The English*, he said bitterly, *are merchants first, soldiers second.*

That night, in a tavern thick with smoke and laughter, fate brushed me with her hand. A man —broad-shouldered, weathered by wind and river— clapped me on the back and cried :

—*I know you ! Montréal-Red River brigade, 1850 !*

—*Gaétan Larochelle !* I shouted, my heart leaping as though from another life.

Red River

We spoke of the old days, of the rivers we had tamed and the rapids we had defied. But time had been cruel. *Rodolphe Vadeboncœur*, dashed against the rocks of the Yellowstone. *Paul Beauregard*, swallowed by the broad, silent Mississippi. *Adrien Lafleur*, lost in the white fury of the Winnipeg River.

And then the name that cleaved my heart :

—*Rémi Bernier*, said Gaétan softly. *He almost drowned last year... in Nebraska... but he lives. He is at Fort-Pierre now !*

My heart stuttered; my soul faltered.

—*Rémi Bernier*... I exclaimed, *Alive ?*

The walls of the tavern blurred, the lamp-smoke thickened, and the earth seemed to sway under my feet. But somewhere, beyond the horizon, in the labyrinth of rivers and plains, the soul I had loved beyond all reason still lived, still walked the living earth — and the flame that had never died in me blazed anew, fierce and trembling.



Fort Pierre Chouteau (Priv. Coll.)

Red River

Chapter 49 **Rémi is Alive !**

Incredible mystery ! Rémi —my Rémi !— had returned from the abyss of death !

At the news, my whole being went into turmoil. My reason wavered ; my heart seemed to tear itself from my breast. The very earth turned liquid beneath my feet, and I collapsed —brutally struck down— against the corner of a table, whose cruel edge bruised my cheekbone but, in a strange mercy, spared me unconsciousness.

—*Oh ! What clumsiness !* I stammered.

—*Did you hurt yourself ?* asked a voice, blurred and distant.

—*No, no... it's nothing... almost...* I whispered, dazed.

They made me sit on a crude wooden bench; Gaétan Larochelle settled into a chair opposite me. Around me, the world spun like the whirlwind of a Prairie storm. In a single instant, all the exiled dreams of my soul took flight again, whiter than swans startled by a gunshot — those divine *birds of passion*, so faithful to love unto death.

Rémi was alive ! Alive ! The very notion thundered through me with the force of a resurrection. Mind dazzled, heart pounding, I could no longer hear Gaétan's endless babble. His words, distorted by the thick bristles of his beard and moustache, reached my ear like the confused hum of a distant river. I saw his lips moving, chewing and twisting the words — but their meaning escaped me utterly.

All that filled my spirit was a burning, devouring thought :

Red River

What had become of Rémi?

Where had the currents of fate carried him ? Was he free ? Had he been claimed by another heart ? This fear, monstrous and suffocating, swelled within me until it filled my chest, my throat, my head, like the bitter nausea of a shipwrecked soul.

At last, unable to contain myself, I exploded :

—*Is he married ?*

Gaétan blinked, startled.

—*Married ?... Who ?*

—*Rémi Bernier, côôliss !* I cried, in a desperate, guttural voice. *Is he married ? Or... does he live with a woman ?*

—*No idea, sti !* he answered, shrugging with insolent indifference. *And I don't see what that has to do with you.*

I no longer heard him. My spirit, wounded to the quick, abandoned him entirely. He turned on his heel in wounded vanity and stormed out, leaving me alone with my torment. Mechanically, I picked up my rifle, paid for my untouched drinks, and stepped out into the night.

The dust of the village streets floated like mist under the uncertain stars. At a slow trot, my appaloosa carried me through the sleeping suburbs, toward the distant fires of the Métis encampment, where French refugees from Rupert's Land had raised their tents in exile and hope.

After a brief parley with the sentry, I found my tent, pitched in haste the night before. There, I lay down — but sleep, that treacherous companion, refused to heed my summons. My mind, battered by fear and yearning, reeled with wild imaginations.

Red River

—I must find him! I must see with my own eyes if he still loved me — if, in the tangled skein of his new life, there yet remained a small place, a simple fold, a crevice of destiny where my soul could fit.

The thought of another woman —of Rémi's heart stolen by another hand— crushed me like a boot upon a wounded bird. I sought in vain for excuses: The land is vast, the distances immense... Perhaps he searched for me and failed !

I rose and knelt by the broken mirror shard that hung in the dim candlelight. I gazed anxiously at my reflection — and barely found it. I saw only a weary, hollowed face, a bruised cheekbone, the pallor of my forehead furrowed by anxiety. Desperate, I smiled — a sad, trembling smile — and noticed how it softened the gaunt features.

—Life is a mirror, my mother used to say. Smile at it, and it smiles back. Yes, I must smile... I must !

But would even the brightest smile hide the ravages of hardship ? Would Rémi's eyes see, beyond my scars, the same woman he had loved ? Could my body, worn like an old violin battered by years, still draw from him the sweet music of passion and desire ? Could the hollow curves of my slender cheeks turn again into dimples, the wreck of my weary soul shine with the beauty of love ?

At first light, I roused my dear Augustin Dagenais from his slumber.

—Augustin, I have found my husband.

He stared, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

—What ? You were married in Canada ? You never told me !

Red River

—I thought him dead... I must leave at once for Fort Pierre. My place is by his side.

—*And... your merchandise ?*

—*Sell it. Keep one third for yourself. And — if you can — lend me 200 piastres for the journey.*

He tried to refuse ; generous as always, he offered to sell everything for me, commission-free. But I insisted, stubbornly clinging to fairness as a lifeline against my guilt.

We embraced tenderly — friends bound by sorrow, each resigned to their own destiny.

—*Goodbye, Augustin, I said, my throat tight. May you too find the love that your noble heart deserves.*

He smiled sadly.

—*Good luck, Alexie. You're lucky to be able to follow your star. As for me... my star has long since died.*

That day, while the camp bustled with merchants come from St. Paul, St. Louis, and New Orleans to greet the smugglers, I boarded a Mississippi steamer bound for Saint-Louis. Two days later, I changed for a Missouri paddle-wheeler and, after four more days — four eternities ! — I arrived at Fort Pierre, on the vast Missouri Plains where once we had battled at Grand Coteau.

How the world was changing ! Steam conquered the rivers, and soon the iron roads would crisscross the land, faster even than dreams. Yet the heart — ah, the human heart !— still traveled at the slow, painful pace of longing.

Red River

Upon arrival, the sight of Fort-Pierre seized my breath. The old trading post rose massive and square on the southern shore, fringed by Indian tipis that bloomed like wildflowers across the plain. Its high wooden palisades enclosed a bustling world of coureurs-de-bois, soldiers, families, stables, workshops, and stores overflowing with tobacco, powder, arms, furs, and baubles.

Trembling with anticipation, I sought out news of him.

—I'm looking for Rémi Bernier, from Cap-Saint-Ignace in Canada... I said, scarcely daring to breathe.

A man, shrugging, replied:

—He was here last month. I think he's gone west, to the Yellow Stone. You might want to check with the Company Office.

I ran, almost breaking into a sob, to the Company's administrative building. The clerk, slow and meticulous, consulted a massive ledger.

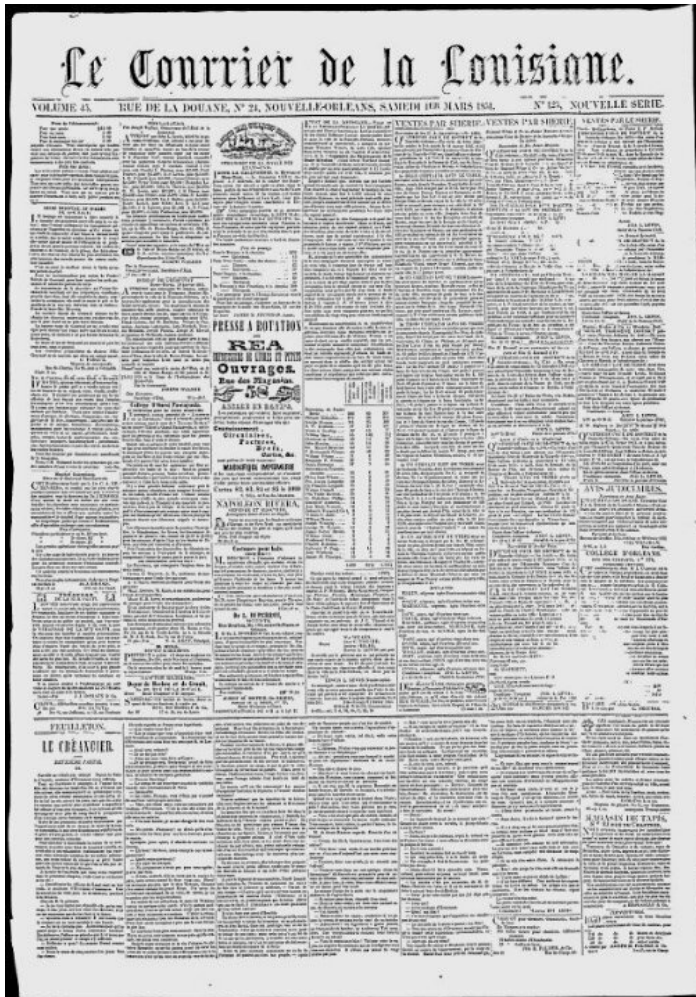
At last, he said:

—He left forty-four days ago to visit the caches along the Yellowstone River. He is expected back next week.

—Next week, my goodness !

A whole week still to wait... a whole week where every second would drip like molten lead on my impatient heart.

But hope — yes, hope! — once dead, was now gloriously alive, and no suffering could darken its resurrection.



Red River

Chapter 50 **Reunited**

The week's wait weighed on me like a century. O Time, envious artisan of my fragile happiness! You dragged your heavy feet across the threshold of my hope, as if jealous of my trembling joy. Even my old resentment toward Pointe-aux-Baptêmes melted away, vanished like a mist before the tempest of fear — the fear that Rémi, indifferent and oblivious, might not even seek me on the Rouge River's sorrowful shores.

— *What do you think, Alexie ?* whispered the insidious voice of my mother, like a coiled serpent in a forgotten corner of my heart. *Men are weak. He has found another, a woman more indulgent of his frailties. And you — you are left alone !*

It was always the same cruel refrain: women bore the faults, men the excuses. But this time, my soul rose in a violent rebellion :

—*No ! I will not abase myself in guilt because he has betrayed me ! He is the wretch, not I !*

—*Yes, yes... but still,* murmured that stubborn maternal voice, *you would do better to be forgiving. Look at yourself ! Have you seen your face, your frightful black eye ?*

—*What of my face?* I retorted, stung to the quick.

—*You would do well to make him drink a gallon of good, strong beer — it makes women beautiful,* she mocked.

At that, the floodgates of my bitterness broke. Was there no sanctuary for my sorrow ? I seized a shard of mirror and, with trembling

Red River

hands, surveyed my bruised and battered reflection. Oh, how fragile still flickered the mad little hope within me !

Each day, I would run to the river's edge, watching the passing steamers — those valiant white birds with wings of iron that splashed the mighty waters with their churning blades, — *paf, paf, paf*— and vanish, swallowed by the endless bends of the Missouri. Boats carrying trappers, furs, mail, and news from distant lands, weaving together the vast tapestry of the New World.

The few ships that sailed beyond Fort Pierre to the Upper Missouri stopped along the way at the many logging camps or at the mouths of small tributaries to take on trappers and, above all, their magnificent furs of lynx, muskrat, fox, mink, skunk and marten, which would soon be worn by the richest women in Paris, New Orleans, New York and London. The mail also followed. Numerous rafts of lumber floated down this great river to the sawmills downstream

Then, at last, from the modest deck of one such white vessel — as radiant and improbable as the stork of ancient legend — my beloved giant appeared. There he was : Rémi ! Alive ! Still broad-shouldered and proud, though I looked eagerly for the marks of hardship, some tender wound of life that might soften his gaze toward my battered soul.

In a moment of desperate boldness, I flung myself into his arms, bursting with joy and terror all at once :

— Rémi ! It is you ! My darling ! By what miracle do I behold you again, when I believed you a lost soul in the gardens of Paradise ?

For an instant, I felt as if I were only an actress in a strange drama, watching myself play a part too grand for my trembling heart. Rémi hesitated — then laughed aloud :

—Alexie ! My wife ! Is it truly you ?

Red River

How many nights had I rehearsed those words, feared another woman would steal them away ! I had even scanned the dock with panicked eyes, spying a young Indian woman and five children, trembling lest they bear some trace of his blood — but no, she had soon boarded a boat, leaving me alone with my dreadful hope.

I took him to the kitchen of the fort and, as we shared a humble meal, bade him tell his tale.

— *On the Winnipeg River, he began, my canoe overturned. I fought to swim, but a rock must have dashed me senseless. When I awoke, it was among the lodges of an Indian camp. They nursed me like one of their own, and in a fortnight, I was restored. In the spring, I joined a brigade heading for Fort William — and thence to Montréal.*

—*Montréal?* I gasped.

—*Yes. I never reached the Rouge River. Instead, I entered the service of the American Fur Company, was sent to Notre-Dame-du-Détroit, then Baie-Verte, and finally charged with the posts along the Missouri and the Yellowstone.*

—*And your task ?*

—*To retrieve the caches : precious furs hidden in bottle-shaped caves deep beneath the earth. I collect them, replace them with pemmican, and deal with the trappers along the great rivers.*

His voice was proud, yet weary. And I — I listened, devouring every word, yet holding my own burning question imprisoned in my breast : *Why had he not sought me ?* I dared not ask it, for fear his answer would shatter me.

Instead, I laughed softly :

Red River

—And I, my dear, have fought the Sioux at Grand-Coteau ! Hunted buffalo, built a house — and almost died more times than I can count !

His eyes widened in astonishment and tender fear, and for a moment, our hearts, battered by life, touched again.

He spoke of building a home together, in Saint-Vital, near the Red River settlements, and though fear clutched at my heart, I dared not resist. Like a prisoner who forgets the taste of freedom, Rémi surrendered to my gentle yoke without a struggle.

Thus, in the golden September of 1854, we resumed our life together. Out of prudence and pride, I insisted on a new marriage ceremony beneath the soaring spires of Saint-Boniface, to bind him anew with sacred chains — a second halter, lest freedom tempt him away again.

It was Father Pierre Aubert, newly come from Marseilles, who blessed our union, his voice carrying the strange, singsong lilt of the southern seas.

My transformation from boy to woman caused a scandal that echoed across the Prairie, from Saint-Paul to the hills of Missouri and even to faraway California. Some hailed me as a heroine, others whispered that I was a witch, a creature of uncertain sex, a scandal to the moral order.

Only the cries of my newborn daughter, Elisabeth — and soon after, Lucas and Albertine — silenced the tongues of the idle and the vicious.

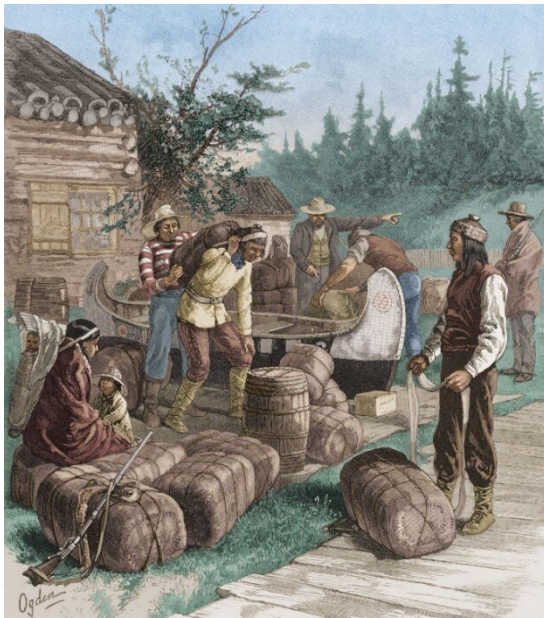
Yet, even then, I clung stubbornly to my masculine attire, my shield against the constraints that womanhood would have chained upon my spirit. Only in Saint-Vital, in the company of my husband and children, did I sometimes bow to tradition, donning petticoats and ribbons to quiet the murmurs of a narrow-minded world.

Red River

Years later, a traveler from Europe, astonished at my story, told me that through the centuries women had sometimes donned the garb of men to seize the sweet and perilous liberties forbidden to their sex — as soldiers, explorers, even, according to legend, as a forgotten Pope.

And so we lived: sowing the earth in spring, pursuing the thundering herds in summer, crafting furniture and fine leathers in winter, which we sold at Saint-Paul, to the chagrin of the monopolistic Hudson's Bay Company.

Thus did our love —bruised, battered, reborn— carve out its place in the vast and merciless splendor of our beloved West.



Métis and Indians at an HBC trading post. Priv.Coll.

Red River

Chapter 51 **The werewolf**

So, life went on as normal, and the years passed even faster in the Great Hourglass of Life, an hourglass that cannot be turned over when the sand runs out; and it's probably better that way.

Our lives as parents passed more quickly on the surface, for our children were milestones that marked the passage of time, elusive and fleeting by nature ; like bottles thrown into the middle of a lake that give the impression of movement to any slow canoe. Our three children, fruit of our great passionate love, had joined us in this world, one after the other, thanks be to God !

All together, we made beautiful runs through our immense Prairie, which, unfortunately, was gradually being emptied of its innumerable bison herds. I remembered the old day when, by perching on one of the rare hills of the "Prairie-planche," you were sure to see at least a few bisons grazing on the thick grass.

Despite my marriage to the man of my life, by the time I was 40, I had become, a rough woman —the more sophisticated inhabitants of Québec City would even call me vulgar — because by behaving like a man, I had come to speak and act like them. I cursed a great deal, as if to accentuate my sentences, and smoked my stinking hart-rouge pipe from morning till night.

My husband smiled smugly when my dagger became my tooth-pick at the end of my daily meals, and he laughed when, instead of putting it down like everybody else, I thrust the dagger with a lightning gesture into one of the logs in the wall. I was still formidable with the axe and the dagger, and I had become formidable with the pistol and the gun.

In spite of my utterly crude and boyish appearance, I was a true mother, and I always did my best to raise my dear children well. We

Red River

taught them kindness and generosity, but it wasn't because we might need them in our old age. I was trying to be more selfless.

Our eldest was left-handed. In those distant days, left-handers were considered inferior, clumsy and even perverse... Some so-called "experts" —you know, one of those vain men who think they can show Men and Women the right way— thought they had innate criminal tendencies. It was not to be, thank God !

I remember very clearly their first steps, their enrollment in school, which they attended as often as possible, taking into account our hunting activities and contract travels, because Rémi and I had to supplement our income as hunters and farmers by fulfilling contracts to deliver parcels and mail on behalf of Canada Post, for the benefit of the federal government. At times, I bitterly regretted that I had induced him to leave his position as regional manager in Missouri in the service of *the American Fur Co.*

My husband and I got along very well. Basically, life as a couple is a bit like square dancing. To evolve properly, you have to avoid stepping on each other's toes. Some still curse because marriage and roses have thorns; when they should appreciate that thorns, like marriage, also bear roses.

In 1867, the year Canada became a Confederation of provinces, I had the opportunity to purchase five *Henry Model 1860* lever action rifles in .45 caliber. A rifle that weighed only 4 kg and could fire 13 shots in 13 pump movements, i.e. in 13 seconds. Oliver Winchester would only have to buy the company to reap fame and fortune. The Henry .45 was a marvel, especially when compared to our old flint fireworks.

In our country, where we could not hide from danger behind non-existent trees, this rifle made all the difference between life and death, for in the West few people still died in their beds, although though the famous Samuel L. Clemens⁴⁵, a Missourian neighbor, had humorously

⁴⁵ •Better known by the pseudonym Mark Twain, which is, in fact, a pollster scream.

Red River

written that the bed is certainly the most dangerous place in the world since 99% of the people die there. When you come face to face with a dangerous enemy —and God knows if they proliferated on the Western Plains— it was fashionable to shoot quickly if you didn't want to play the wrong part.

—May these weapons, my children, serve you only to respect Good and Justice, and to fight against Evil and Injustice !

Some people sometimes behave like wolves; But it's up to us to refuse to play lambs. The most difficult thing in these conditions was to maintain a sense of justice, duty and respect for others; qualities that we have tried to pass on to our dear children.

I have always tried to give the best of myself to my family, especially in the field of religion. From 1858, when I was pregnant with Albertine, I realized that if I wanted my children, who were then only one and two years old, to receive some knowledge of religion, I would have to be an example to them. Hitherto I had been somewhat lax in this matter, and I had yawned only a few *paters* and still fewer *aves*. Maybe it's sexism ! Until one day, on the Sunday of Quasimodo⁴⁶, I heard the bell tolling in the steeple of our parish church of Saint-Vital.

—Do you know who died, Madame Laboucane? I asked my neighbor.

—It's your soul, Madame Bernier, that is dead. You haven't had your Easter, I think !

—What do you mean, Madame Laboucane?

—I mean that if you have not received Communion at least on Easter Day, your soul dies, and the bell tolls to remind you and all those who have not made their Easter communion that their souls are dead. But... Didn't you know that in Canada ?

⁴⁶ ●April 11, 1858. Easter that year was on April 4.

Red River

—Yes, yes, Madame Laboucane. In Canada, we have the same beliefs, you know ! But the truth is... Personally, I don't believe it !

—You don't believe it ? It's terrible, Madame Bernier, you're going to be damned, if you die, Madame. Bernier. And if you neglect to celebrate Easter for seven years in a row, you're going to be turned into a werewolf !

I did remember that my mother used to say this every year on Easter Day, probably to scare us and force us to go to communion.

—Do you believe in this werewolf story ? I replied, smiling.

—Ah! I'm convinced of it. A trusted person told me that a resident of Pembina had been turned into a werewolf just last year, and another in Saint-Pierre ! You should go to evening mass right away, before night-fall.

This Madame Laboucane seemed to me very credulous.

—Well, I'll go there to please you, Madame Laboucane !

After all, I didn't believe in this ridiculous legend, but... in case !



Fort Whoop Up [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 52

The Horror of Fort Whoop-Up

Thus, as I have already recounted, we obtained in the year of grace of 1868 a contract for the arduous transportation of heavy loads between La Fourche and various outposts of the Deep West, among them the infamous Fort Whoop-Up.

Lucas was then twelve, Élisabeth eleven, and little Albertine but nine years old. They were beautiful children, radiant with that frank innocence which only the most tender care can preserve. I had devoted myself passionately to their education. All three could read, write, and handle a rifle with admirable dexterity — a vital skill in these savage territories where the future of a child could be cut down as swiftly as a blade of prairie grass. They had made their solemn communion and were fluent in both French and English, those twin tongues of our precarious civilization.

From 1861, when Lucas, barely five, had first entered the French school of the *Frère des Écoles chrétiennes* at Saint-Boniface, and the following year Élisabeth had joined the noble *Grey Nuns'* school, our lives had been devoted to threading together the fragile tapestry of culture amid a tide of barbarism.

Albertine, in her turn, followed her sister's path two years later. The French-speaking religious communities of Montreal had established schools and hospitals throughout the West.

Yet even in their diligent studies, I could not bear to leave them behind in a world trembling on the edge of chaos. I periodically tore them from the cloisters of learning at Saint-Boniface to accompany us into the wilderness, believing that the dangers of the road were less fearsome than the slow, invisible erosion threatening our French-speaking people under the advancing flood of Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Red River

They grew, meanwhile, in strength, in wisdom, and in skill, like three young saplings bent by the wind yet unbroken.

It was toward *Fort Whoop-Up* that we now set our course — a desolate outpost raised at the confluence of the Saint Mary and Belley Rivers, near what would one day be the city of Lethbridge. Once called *Fort Hamilton*, it had been built by an American bootlegger and, after a devastating fire, rechristened with a coarse, mocking name meant to lure the Indians into its sordid embrace.

A wretched fort it was — no more than a rude palisade of sharpened logs rising to a height of four meters, roughly square, with two corners reinforced by bastions. Upon one of these, flapped the tattered ghost of an expired American flag, bearing but thirty-five stars — two fewer than the Union then boasted. Rémi, always keen-eyed, mocked this oversight.

The bastions, pierced for muskets and light cannon, guarded a handful of grim wooden buildings. Each door, window, and chimney was barred with heavy iron grates, and the great gate that yawned onto the central courtyard was pierced by a wicket small enough to deny entry to all but the most welcome. The place reeked of distrust and menace, and soon I discovered why.

It was on the 13th of May that I halted my four carts before that dismal threshold. Striking the gate with the butt of my Henry rifle — chambered with thirteen golden bullets — I shouted into the emptiness :

—*Hey, in there ! Open up !*

Above us, in a sky as blue and indifferent as the eyes of fate, a flock of wild ducks quacked restlessly. At length the wicket creaked open, revealing a pale, unshaven face surmounted by a battered black felt hat. The man muttered a few words of English. Rémi, who had picked up enough of the language in his wanderings, answered that we were

Red River

freighters bearing mail for the Canadian Postal Service. The gate opened grudgingly, its hinges groaning like a gallows eager to kill.

Inside we found two American “*traders*”, whose appearance could have curdled the blood of the most hardened banker. Dressed in coarse grey shirts and denim trousers, their hips bristled with Colt revolvers, and their left hands seemed fused to the rifles they were clutching.

Their trade was the vilest kind : exchanging adulterated alcohol, ammunition, and firearms for the Indians’ rich pelts. They were ex-soldiers, outlaws, drifters, and vagabonds, men who had slithered northward from the gutters of Missouri and Kansas, seeking fortune in the ruin of others.

To us of the Canadian Prairie, places like Fort Whoop-Up were synonymous with corruption, crime, and despair.

The Indians, aware of their own ruin, often tried to storm these dens of vice, hoping to seize back the cursed liquors and the weapons of their own destruction. Hence the sharpened palisades, the loopholes, the cannons — all meant to stave off the very souls they had poisoned.

As for the American authorities, they washed their hands of the matter, claiming that the crimes occurred on Canadian soil. And we, poor fools, had no police force yet in these endless plains. Thus, we moved heavily armed, like crusaders journeying through infidel lands.

One of the Americans, feigning hospitality, suggested we lodge for the night in the northwest bastion. In truth, they sought merely the borrowed strength of our rifles. Thus, our family —myself, Rémi, and our children— slept behind the thick logs, under the indifferent stars, guarding a place we loathed.

The next morning, at the hour when the ravens quarrel over the first dead, a voice rose from beyond the fort.

Red River

—Uhhh ! Anyone ?

Peering through a loophole, I saw a group of Blood Indians, leading a cayusse dragging a travois heavy with goods. Rémi alerted our reluctant hosts, who approached, rifles clenched, with the eager grimace of hyenas scenting prey.

The Indians had come to barter : pelts for whiskey, pemmican for powder. At the gate they performed the Barter Dance — a solemn, tragic ritual. Overhead, the ravens screamed, as if mocking the folly of man.

The Americans admitted a few chiefs and offered them a “*welcome drink*”— a glass of *fire water*, so noxious it would have sickened a mule. The Indians, wary, held the alcohol in their mouths, and upon stepping outside, spat it carefully into the mouths of their waiting brothers. Thus, they preserved the precious poison without losing their senses.

I watched, sickened. These were not the proud warriors of the Grand Coteau, but broken men, corrupted by the traders’ devilish concoctions. And the traders —oh, the traders !— grinned like demons fattening upon damned souls.

The transaction followed its grim course. Drunkenness spread like wildfire. The women, wiser than their men, tried to hold back, but were eventually drawn into the whirlpool of delirium.

—I forbid you to drink ! I cried to Rémi. Stay sharp — for when the shooting begins, it is not the Indians we shall defend, but ourselves against these monsters!

The hours dragged. As the furs dwindled, so too did the traders’ hospitality. They opened the gate to admit the Indians’ last possessions — their food, their tents, even their ponies.

Red River

—*Sometimes they even shove their daughters through the gate ! sneered one of the Americans.*

I turned away, retching with disgust.

Toward evening, as the last pelts vanished and the last bottles were drained, a terrible tension filled the air. The traders gripped their rifles and readied their "pusher poles" to drive back any attempt at storming the walls.

When the inevitable clash came, cannon shots boomed overhead, scattering the bewildered and drunken Indians like leaves before a storm. Some poor women dragged the insensible bodies of their men into the shelter of the bushes. Others, humiliated and shamed, returned the next day to beg for scraps of food.

At last, our grim duty completed, we gathered our children, our throats knotted with loathing, and set out for the Rouge River, vowing never again to set foot in such a cesspit of degradation.

Weeks passed. Slowly the horror faded. Our children returned to their studies with courage and perseverance, trying to forget what they had seen.

And then, one bright spring day in 1870, Albertine, her eyes shining with excitement, ran to us :

—*Maman, Papa, for Bishop Clut's visit, our school is staging a play, Un dernier Souvenir de la Patrie by Sister Malvina Colette ! May we go ?*

—*Of course, dear child, of course !*

Thus it was that, after so many scenes of human misery, our little family found itself attending the first theatrical performance ever staged in the West — a fragile, stubborn flower of French culture blooming amid the ashes.

Chapter 53
The Outlaws of Montana

The year was 1873. We were traversing the sepulchral undulations of the *Monts-des-Cypres* (today *Cypress Mountain*), those wind-swept hills that rise from the earth like petrified waves, grey with solitude, redolent with the breath of ancient buffalo and bygone wars. A mail contract bound us to that path, but destiny, with its hidden snares, had laid before us an altogether different duty.

We made camp at twilight near a crescent of Assiniboine tipis, their silhouettes etched in firelight against the cobalt sky. A short distance away stood a cluster of Métis homes — humble, wind-swept dwellings whose occupants were kin to Rémi through some forgotten coureur-de-bois who had long ago cast his seed into this land and taken an Indian bride in the old, wild fashion.

Lucas was seventeen — a lion in sinew and stance, the mirror of his father. Élisabeth, a year older, moved with feline ease, her eyes alight with the pride of youth. As for Albertine, though but fourteen, she bore the vigilance of a lynx : eyes like northern stars, hands sure as Justice. She, too, had learned the rifle, and her aim could rival any man's on the Prairie.

At dawn, silence ruled our camp. We slumbered in our carts — wooden fortresses lashed between trees, our beasts tethered loosely to graze in freedom. I slept beneath a buffalo robe, the breath of night cool upon my cheek. Then a sound broke the hush: a metallic clatter, a guttural curse in the darkness.

I cast aside the robe, peered through the slatted boards I had nailed to our Red River cart. In the twilight's ambiguity, I saw them—sixteen of them, vultures in human guise, draped in gun belts and cloaked in lawlessness. Their banner —a star-spangled rag— fluttered atop a

Red River

makeshift counter like a mockery of decency. Two great wagons crouched nearby like carnivores : either laden with tainted liquor or waiting to devour the spoils of their evil commerce.

—*Luc ! Elise ! Albertine !* I whispered fiercely toward the other cart. *Awake ! To arms !*

Lucas, ever the light sleeper, answered first.

—*They're smugglers, I murmured, from Montana, armed and many. Stay hidden. Ready yourselves.*

The children answered as one : “*Oui, Maman.*”

I knew their kind — merchants of ruin, venders of firewater so vile that even devils might spit it out. They came with poisoned smiles and promises, then plundered the drunken camps, making off with pemmican, pelts, oxen, horses — whatever could be taken under the moon's indifference. It was not mere theft. It was desecration.

Our animals were their inevitable prize. But beyond our own survival lay a nobler imperative: to shield these unsuspecting Assiniboine from massacre. To remain unmounted on the open Prairie was a death sentence written in dust. The law had no dominion here. The Mounted Police had not yet emerged from Canada's conscience. No badge defended this horizon — only the crack of a just rifle.

We soon learned this was not commerce — it was vendetta. The Montanese sought vengeance for horses they believed stolen the night before, and they meant to exact it not from the guilty, but from the nearest innocents. These men, perfumed in whiskey and pride, had mistaken retribution for justice.

When the Assiniboine lay drunk, poisoned by the very hand that now trembled with the taste of murder, the gang opened fire. That instant, my fury eclipsed every commandment I had once believed in.

Red River

—*Fire at will on these cursed butchers ! I roared. Crush these vermin !*

—*Mother ! cried Albertine, with wounded innocence, you should be ashamed to speak so of other human beings !*

—*I said: fire at will ! I have no time for sermons !*

Rémi chuckled, even as he loaded his rifle.

—*Oh, you can laugh ! I spat, bitterness surging. And I once prayed for your soul, weeping for you like a widow ! You unfaithful rogue !*

—*Lâche-moi les mocassins, Alexie, he grinned. Get off my back.*

—*Fire at will ! I repeated, unwilling to admit my sins, especially the obvious ones.*

Our Henry rifles unleashed a storm of death. The drunken Montanese, dazed, confused, began to fall like harvest sheaves. Eight fell before they understood the heavens were not punishing them, but mortals like us. Their leader, rallying with curses, died with a bullet in his temple.

The survivors, shaken sober by carnage, gathered what strength they had and fled, dragging wounded comrades onto their horses, leaving behind wagons, corpses, and their shattered bravado. I handed their abandoned *pintos* to the surviving Assiniboine. Forty lives had been lost — for nothing.

We went to Fort Benton (Montana) to seek justice, though we knew its halls echoed more with commerce than with righteousness.

—*They won't be punished, Rémi said, shaking his head.*

—*But it's not fair !* cried Albertine.

Red River

—No, I replied, *but justice is a frail bird in a sky full of vultures. Three winters ago, a young Indian was cheated of his horses by a settler named Clarke. In desperation, the boy killed Clarke — and in return, an American colonel massacred hundreds of his people along the Marias River.*

Fort Benton was a fortress of clay and commerce, built upon the bones of Fort Lewis. Its gates opened not to justice, but to trade. Our complaint vanished like smoke. A few arrests were made, but no convictions. The word “self-defense” hung over them like a shroud.

We left, retracing our steps eastward, along the Marias River, to confuse any would-be pursuers. As we rode, I recalled a poem read long ago in a classroom :

*“We walked alone and dreamt,
He and I, with our hair and thoughts in the wind.”*

We were lovers again, fugitives in a cruel world.

But the Montanans had not forgotten. One night, on the banks of the Marias River, they arrived to surprise us in our sleep : four shadows, shrouded in darkness. Lucas stood guard between midnight and two in the morning. Sleep pursued him like a wolf, but he fought it off. Then he saw the ember of a cigar — death in orange glow — bobbing toward our camp.

—*Dad*, he whispered, *here they are*

—*Fire*, Rémi answered.

Lucas fired first — his aim true, his soul ablaze. The cigar fell, the shadows scattered. I flanked to the right, crawling through thorns, whispering in French not to shoot me. Twice I saw the glint of their rifles. Twice I fired. Twice I vanished. One survivor fled, dragging hell with him.

Red River

A few weeks later, we reported all of it — to Ottawa. I was later told that our tale helped stir the conscience of the young Dominion. The *North-West Mounted Police* was born not long after.

In 1874, we returned to the *Monts-des-Cypres* with another mail contract. This time, a man of promise was there to greet us: Inspector *Éphraïm Brisebois*, of the new police force.

Brisebois built a fort where once the French had raised *Fort La Jonquière*,⁴⁷ where the city of Calgary is located today. Brisebois worked with haste and virtue, building shelters before winter's claw could strike. He called his bastion Fort-Brisebois. But history, ever unjust, would not let the name stand.

With his 150 gendarmes from the French-speaking squadron, Brisebois, in the heart of American outlaw country, attempted to buy Fort Whoop-Up, but was unable to do so due to lack of funds.⁴⁸ Macleod built Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills the following spring, just four kilometers from the site of the Assiniboine massacre just mentioned. With these forts guarding the outlaw bootleggers, hostile Blackfoot Indians, and Sioux refugees from the United States, where they were being hunted by the US cavalry, the country regained some relative calm. The Mounted Police began to seize the fixed and mobile trading posts and their furs, and to pour the adulterated alcohol into the tall grass of the Prairie. Outlaws were captured, tried, and sentenced to six months in prison and a \$200 fine.

⁴⁷ In honor of Jacques-Pierre de Taffanel, Marquis de La Jonquière, a native of the Tarn region who died in Québec City and was Governor of New France from 1749 to 1752. A city in Québec also took his name in 1850, on the shores of Lac-Saint-Jean. In 2002, Jonquière became one of the boroughs of Saguenay, a consolidated municipality.

⁴⁸ According to my recollection, the outlaws wanted \$25,000 and the Mounted Police could only offer them \$10,000. Ephraïm Brisebois [1850–1890] was a fighter. He fought during part of the American Civil War, in the Union Army, like many French Canadians. From 1868 to 1870, he enlisted in Rome in a regiment of Papal Zouaves. In 1873, he became an officer in the newly formed Mounted Police, now known as the Canadian Federal Mounted Police.

Red River

The wealthy wholesale merchants of Fort Benton, south of the border, who were orchestrating the misdeeds of these outlaws and their rotten alcohol from afar, attempted, in the name of the sacrosanct freedom of trade, to get President Ulysses Grant to intervene and force us to tolerate the presence of these thugs and their lethal products. But General Grant refused, for once, to send in his cavalry to bring the colonial government of Canada to heel. As a result, within a few months, the outlaws were driven back to their own country.

Then Macleod —his superior— renamed Fort-Brisebois Fort-Calgary, after his wife's birthplace in Scotland. The custom was broken, the honour denied. When Brisebois resisted, he was dismissed for "*in-subordination*"—a lie cloaked in authority.

—*Mother ! Albertine exclaimed. Aren't the police meant to protect justice ?*

—*Yes, child. But sometimes the guardians of law wear masks of ambition. And the good, like Inspector Brisebois, is forgotten.*



Fort-Brisebois (Fort-Calgary) in 1878. (Priv. Coll.)

Chapter 54
Tribulations on the Prairies

In those waning years of the nineteenth century, when the Western skies bore the bruises of conquest and the earth still bled from the heel of colonizing empires, our beloved Prairies, so vast, so grave, had become a theatre of human and animal despair.

The West was now a Dominion of Canada, in name if not in spirit, and with this annexation came not peace but a new chapter of torments — of fire and poison, of strychnine and gunpowder, of men transformed into wolves, and wolves hunted like vermin.

The *wolfers*, those spectral horsemen from the South, roamed the Plains with jaws as cruel as the steel traps they laid. In their eyes gleamed the bounty of silver coins, not the mercy of creation. Armed with rapid-fire rifles, they left behind them not justice, but the stench of slaughter — for it was not wolves alone they hunted, but any creature or man who dared stand between them and their reward.

Rémi and I, sensing the wildness in their hearts, traveled armed as if through a war zone, our rifles slung across our shoulders not as tools of aggression, but as talismans of survival.

To collect their prize, these men cut the ears from the lifeless heads of wolves — ears that once twitched in the silence of moonlit snows, listening for danger or prey. The poisoned carcasses of buffalo, corrupted with strychnine, became grotesque altars to greed. The poison did not discriminate: dogs, children, innocents — all fell victim.

I recall with horror the day we crossed paths with a mourning Cree woman, wailing beside the small, stiffened body of her child. The boy had eaten from a carcass his father believed safe. His death came in

Red River

spasms and silence. The Prairie wind, ever impartial, carried no condolences. But the Montanans had not forgotten.

In righteous vengeance, the Indians took arms against these bringers of death. Those who sold to them the deadly Henry rifles — soon to evolve into the infamous Winchesters — had unwittingly armed the very hands that would avenge the poisoned. Thus, wolfers and smugglers alike perished, swallowed by the darkness they had sown, their blood soaking into the same sacred earth they had defiled.

The North-West Mounted Police, valiant though they were, patrolled a wilderness too immense, too unruly to tame. The law flickered like a lantern in a storm, casting shadows more often than light.

In this tempest of lawlessness and dread, the greatest peril came not from the native tribes, who still held communion with the land, but from the newcomers — the endless waves of pale-skinned pilgrims fleeing famine, conscription, and ruin in their homelands : Englishmen, Prussians, Neapolitans — they arrived in multitudes, not with reverence but with arrogance, seeking to rebuild on our soil the very systems of injustice they had once denounced and fled.

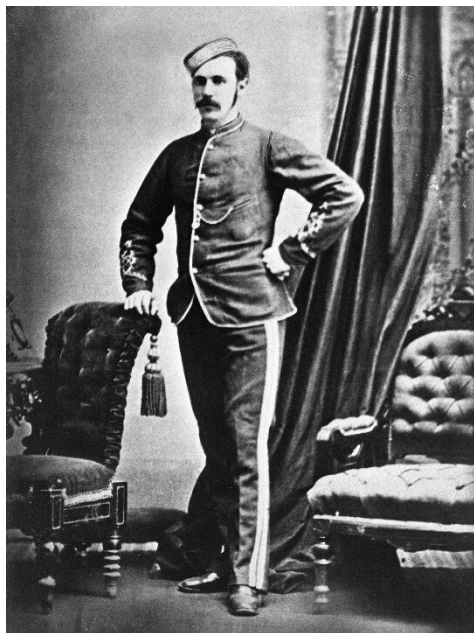
In their baggage they carried not only hunger and ambition, but the very seeds of ruin. They placed themselves at the top of the social pyramid, abandoning Métis and Autochtones to the worst poverty

Oh, how swiftly they overturned our fragile harmony ! Customs that had been shaped by buffalo, wind, and prayer now buckled under the weight of foreign law and alien appetites. We, the Métis, born of two rivers — one Native, one French — watched our heritage unravel like thread from a dying loom.

And then came the merchants of dreams — no longer content with whisky, they now trafficked in lotus dust : Opium — silent, fragrant, infernal. It crept through our settlements like a ghost.

Red River

The *British East India Company*, eager to generate huge profits for its wealthy London shareholders, all bourgeois figures bound by narrow Victorian morality and scrupulous virtue, produced this drug on an industrial scale in its distant colonies in Bengal.



Colonel Ephraïm Brisebois 1850-1890 [Priv.Coll.]

Chapter 55
Return to the East

Since that grievous spring of 1885, when the blood of Batoche soaked the grasslands beneath the boots of colonial soldiers inflamed by a blind fanaticism, I had harbored, like a secret fire, the hope of returning to the cradle of my youth — an East made sacred by the dreams of my childhood and magnified by the distance of time. I longed to gather the scattered threads of kinship, to bring my children —born of the Prairies and baptized in buffalo blood— back into the warm fold of our ancestral hearth near Lac-Saint-Jean. There, I dreamed, our roots might twine once more with those of our distant cousins, long nurtured in the shadow of Québec’s eternal pines.

Lucas, my firstborn, had become an auctioneer — an orator of rhythmic thunder who tamed the air with double-speak and flamboyant cadence. His tongue, quicker than gunpowder, could extract gold from stone. From fairs in the Dakotas to farms in the Saskatchewan Valley, he had spread his name like a galloping echo. “*Aim for the stars,*” I would tell him, borrowing my late mother’s celestial counsel, “*and you may at least land on the moon.*” To which he, ever the rogue, replied : “*Let’s just hope I don’t get stuck there. I’m distracted enough as it is !*”

Ah, my mother — poor, pious soul! Her own ambitions ascended past moon and stars to Paradise itself. It is her voice I heard in the rustling aspens, her gaze I glimpsed in the evening star that blessed our westward journeys.

The world, meanwhile, was changing beneath our feet. Since 1881, when the last echo of the buffalo vanished into the trembling dusk of memory, iron rails had slashed across the West like a saber. By 1883, the shriek of the locomotive pierced Brisebois’s, I mean Calgary’s silence.

Red River

Along the steel arteries, heaps of buffalo bones loomed like the tombstones of a murdered continent. The place once known as Pile-d'Os (Pile of Bones) had been christened Regina by the Duchess Louise, who sowed the names of her lineage across our map like a conqueror scattering flags upon vanquished soil.

I was nearing seventy winters —those grey years when the body bends and the breath shortens— and I could not, with honour or health, repeat the heroic labor of canoe and portage. The *coureurs-de-bois* were dead or forgotten, their bones swallowed by rapids, their names devoured by the current. So, I boarded the train —an iron cathedral upon wheels— and began my pilgrimage back to Québec.

In 1899, I returned—my hands buried deep in the empty pockets of my lost illusions. My life ? A short litany of grand disillusion, separated by fleeting joys like lanterns flickering on the wind. My children, now in the prime of their own journeys —Élisabeth, Lucas, and Albertine— joined me with their broods in Calgary, and we boarded the train east, tracing in reverse the bloodstained path of our forefathers.

The cars overflowed with immigrants —souls exiled by poverty, war, and superstition. Germans, Jews, Doukhobors, Muslims, Mennonites, Irish Catholics— all huddled in patched garments and hope. A man with a Prussian accent told me of their flight from religious tyranny. Another, cradling a blond child, whispered: “*We are Doukhobors from Russia, seeking a land of peace.*” A Catholic Englishman, lame in one leg, confided bitterly: “*The Test Act is gone, but its shadow clings to us still. We come to Canada for breath.*”

And so, I beheld this exodus of the damned, a procession of Europe's victims packed into railcars like sacrificial lambs. The poor, the orphaned, the persecuted — sacrificed by their kings, their priests, and their industrial lords on the altar of imperial greed. Capitalism —the re-birth of slavery— fed upon their flesh. In its obscene wake, it birthed its two bastard children : *International Socialism* and, more dreadfully, the mad chimera of *National Socialism*.

Red River

And where did these sorrowful pilgrims disembark ? In our West. On Métis lands, soaked in the blood of my brothers. On Indian lands, emptied by starvation and coercion. Like thieves in the night, they planted alien flags in the wounds of our nation. My God, what had become of our world ?

As the train devoured the landscape I had once crossed with blistered feet, I thought of the *coureurs-de-bois*—those gallant sons of New France whose laughter once echoed along the rivers. On some riverbanks, wooden crosses still stood defiantly, half-rotted but unbowed, surrounded by flowers and butterflies. No one remembered their names. Laframboise, Beauséjour, Chapdelaine — forgotten footnotes in a rich man's ledger.

And yet, those men had shaped a continent. Their blood and sinew carved trails from the Atlantic to the Rockies. Their descendants live in every sinew of the North American soul.

We passed through Montréal, now swollen to four times its former size, and I sought out the Hôtel Rosco — my refuge in another life. It still stood, gleaming and transformed. Electric lights blazed at the flick of a switch, and my grandchildren, in a delirium of joy, played with this new sun conjured by porcelain knobs.

—*Let the magic star rise!* they cried, laughing.

But even joy carries a veil of sorrow. Tuberculosis still claimed the poorest, and the tavern where I had once worked had vanished, replaced by a dreary haberdashery whose owner knew nothing of the laughter, tears, or songs once spilled on those flagstones. Malou, my faithful dog — gone. A page torn from the book of my soul.

And yet, Montréal still had its fire. On our first night, a riot broke out on *Place d'Armes*. The city was torn between two visions of empire — between the Boer War and its bloody camps, and the cries for equality and respect of democracy that rang from French Canadian hearts.

Red River

—The Boers only wished to live, someone told me. Then England found gold under their feet. So, she sent armies to plunder.

And the Gazette, ever the herald of imperial arrogance, called for blood. Protesters ransacked La Patrie and La Presse, while tricolour flags were torn down and replaced with the Union Jack. But the students of McGill were soon routed by French youth, burning with ancestral rage.

—We've found no more peace than we had at Red River, murmured Georges, my grandson.

The next morning, we left for Québec, but diverted through the forested veins of the Laurentians. Chicoutimi now had its railway, and we rode it like pilgrims returning to holy ground. We would stop in Québec City on our return.

—There's a castle now, said the porter. A brand-new one—Château Frontenac. You'll love it.

—I shall return, I said, with a smile that carried the weight of half a century.



Red River

Chapter 56 **Chicoutimi**

Two days later, we reached Chicoutimi — that hallowed name of Montagnais origin, meaning “*the place where the deep waters end.*”

I halted our caravan at the edge of the great river and said to my children and grandchildren, who had so often heard me sing the praises of this lost Eden :

—*This has nothing to do with the handful of cabins that once made up Rivière-aux-Rats, in the bygone year of 1849.*

We took lodging at the Hôtel Château-Saguenay, a proud edifice whose stones still exhaled the breath of their first mortar, completed only the year before. Marius, curious and still damp from the river mist, picked up a local newspaper lying forgotten on a table :

—*Everything looks new here !* he exclaimed, reading the *Progrès du Saguenay*, whose very pages seemed to smell of fresh ink.

Without delay, we set out to find the living remnants of my family. Only four brothers and sisters remained, survivors of time’s cruel harvest, surrounded by a bustling constellation of nephews and grand-nephews who had scattered like seeds across the region.

My poor father had died in 1875, my sainted mother had followed him ten years later — even as I was still fighting the iron armies of colonial Canada in the dark plains of Saskatchewan. I went alone to the little cemetery on Rue Racine, a stone’s throw from the hospital, and laid trembling flowers upon their grave. My brother told me that they had heard of me but once since my disappearance — from the priest of La Malbaie, who had harbored me for a single night before the silence fell once more.

Red River

That evening, by the fire's ancient guardianship, I wept — and wept bitter tears of contrition. In my journal, I composed a long, broken letter to the dead, begging forgiveness for my abrupt abandonment. When I had covered the page with the ink of my soul, I held the letter over the flames. The paper, now glowing with remorse, spiraled up the chimney in fragile ashes, bearing heavenward my cries of repentance.

That night, unbeknownst to the others, I made my decision :

I would remain. Here, where my ancestors slept. Here, where their dust cried out to me from beneath the cold stone. When morning came, I turned to them — my children, my grandchildren — and declared through tears :

—From now on, I shall stay with you !

But alas, life plays cruel games with the heart. For I now realize, with a clarity as painful as it is lucid, that this resolution was the second betrayal of my life — another flight from love. I was abandoning my children as once I had abandoned my parents, for reasons which would forever remain obscure even to myself.

Faithful Rémi, my companion of so many storms, decided once again to tether his destiny to mine. He, so constant since our second union, ever ready to sacrifice himself to my sovereign whims, bent under the yoke of my selfishness with a patience that shamed me. He endured my fits of temper, my cruel rages, with the silent courage of a martyr.

We found a modest furnished apartment. Only one old house still survived amid the city's arrogant adolescence — a lone sentinel from another time, recently refitted but still wearing its ancient soul. Each evening, I would walk past it, that relic of my childhood, staring at its silent façade as though it might whisper secrets to me. I interrogated its weathered stones, seeking to reignite the dying embers of my memory.

At times, I imagined it speaking :

Red River

—I have seen so many things... I am, in a way, the town's heroine. But like all old heroes, I have become little more than a bore to the young. Only greybeards like you still see me for what I am — and speculators, too, but they do not ask me for my stories.

—You are brutally honest, I would retort, half-smiling. But then, perhaps so am I. Age has made you a venerable monument, and me a ruin. Let us not mock each other for wearing the dust of time.

Passers-by began to eye me with curiosity as I spoke aloud to the house, and so, one day, I simply walked on.

By summer's end, the rest of the family returned westward. I had promised to visit them yearly with Rémi... but that, too, became another broken vow scattered by the winds.

Thus, we remained, Rémi and I, shipwrecked souls marooned in Chicoutimi. And there, among the fading leaves of autumn, I began to write the chronicle of my life — that long voyage through tempests and shipwrecks, through loves crowned and loves lost.

Each night, rocking gently in my chair, I would stir the champagne of memory — those shimmering bubbles that rose only to burst into gall and bitterness, leaving behind a throbbing headache of regret. Even when I tried to clothe my memories in the gaudy feathers of metaphor, they remained funeral wreaths laid upon the tomb of my past.

And always, always, I was haunted by the ghost of the *Hudson's Bay Company* — that sinister specter whose iron grip had strangled our dreams.

I marvel to see how historians can paint this monstrous Company in noble colors, when it had crushed the hopes of a whole people beneath the wheels of its greed. At night, it rises again, a cruel stepmother in my dreams, sowing nightmares with a viper's touch.

Red River

Even today, the West of my youth returns to me when sleep mercifully breaks the chains of Batoche and its despair. In the velvet silence, I hear again the roars of bison challenging one another in the dark ; the anxious squeak of prairie dogs standing sentinel ; the howling of coyotes threading between the tents ; the whippoorwills crying “Bois-Pourri ! Bois-Pourri !” into the endless blackness ; and the deep choruses of frogs droning like monks in a cathedral of water.

And above all, I miss the tourtes —the passenger pigeons— whose wings had once darkened the heavens with their living clouds, before vanishing forever into the pitiless oblivion of civilization. Their blue-grey eggs, once strewn across the grasslands like offerings, will never again nourish a child’s laughing hands.

The West has fallen silent, like the civilizations of the Nubians, Anatolians or Pascuans. But in my heart, it still sings — faint, but defiant — a song too ancient for forgetting.



Prairie tourtes voyageuses

The Passenger Pigeon was once the most abundant bird in North America. It disappeared in 1914 due to extreme hunting practices, has become a symbol of mass extinction caused by humans. . (Priv.Coll.)

Epilogue

Today, as I await my summons before the mysterious Gate of the Beyond, nostalgia and melancholy alone remain faithful to me — silent companions who, alongside Rémi, watch over the twilight of my days. My heart overflows with tears that pride has long forbidden me to shed. I had always thought anger the nobler sentiment; it flares like a torch, while sorrow smolders like a betrayal of the soul.

My devoted husband, ever vigilant, does not like to see me yield to these perfidious lovers who besiege me in my solitude. My mother, in the luminous ignorance of her own youth, had once told me that good always triumphs over evil. Alas ! My life has proven otherwise. Since that distant year of 1899, I have savored the quiet happiness of never parting from Rémi — the only friend life truly granted me, for friendship, like love, demands a gift of the soul that I knew not how to offer. Yet he stayed. Despite my shortcomings, despite the tempests of my heart, he stayed. Had he left once more, I do not know if I would have had the strength to remain behind.

The old wound of *Pointe-aux-Baptêmes* — that wound of love and betrayal — was long since healed, not by repentance, but by the slow and generous labor of his unwavering tenderness, more precious than a thousand "*Han ! Han !*" groans on the weary portages of our youth. I have learned, late, to honor his generosity, for truly, opposites attract : Rémi, steadfast as an angel; I, proud and wounded, yet tethered still by love's frail but tenacious cords. Is not the truest friend the one who knows the depths of our darkness and yet chooses, inexplicably, to love us still ?

But alas ! age has robbed me even of my vices, those mischievous companions of youth, now rendered useless by the slow decay of this mortal frame. My body, once vibrant, obeys no longer. Each limb, each nerve, seems to have received from some austere tribunal the secret

Red River

order to wither, to withhold its strength, to wither away in torment, so that the soul itself might tire of clinging to this fragile shell. Even before I have finished committing the last of my memories to paper, death whispers already at the threshold.

Rémi, too, has bent beneath the weight of years. His once-lustrous hair, now fallen away, leaves a shining dome I kiss with reverence, as if each caress might soothe the snows of so many winters. His gait is stooped, his hands trembling — and yet, like me, he bears the secret bruises of a soul that has survived too much. The world, transformed beyond recognition, no longer belongs to us. We are but exiles awaiting the call to return to that other homeland, the only one that does not betray.

I have long ceased to question him about the silence that once lay between us — why he did not seek me out, after his accident, in the Red River Colony. Every soul must preserve its secret gardens, inviolate. I respect his. It is enough that, here at the end of the road, we share once more the fragile miracle of memory, that he helps me, as once at Grand-Coteau against the urgent Sioux, to keep despair at bay.

And what, after all, remains of a long life but the love of those we cherished ? The memory of Rémi, the absent faces of my dear children — these are now the final treasures of my heart.

Good evening, friend — I must leave you now. It is time to prepare myself for the journey beyond.



Final Word

Alexie de La Durantaye-Bernier breathed her last on August 3, 1909, with scarcely a sigh of regret, for life had been for her less a banquet than a long and silent fast. She departed the world without clinging to its illusions, having known more sorrow than exultation. Father Dominique Racine, austere guardian of Saint-François-Xavier in Chicoutimi, sought, with the zeal of an ancient theologian, to forbid her cremation, invoking the spectral fear that ashes, dispersed to the winds, might not rise at the Trumpet of the Last Day.

But Rémi, with his heart crushed under the weight of an irremediable absence, answered through his tears that Alexie, ever defiant before both the judgment of men and the mysteries of Heaven, would not dread being forgotten by the God of tombs and ruins. At his insistence, their children — sacred fruits of a love woven from storm and tenderness — gathered her ashes, and, when the warm chinook rose from the depths of the Pacific to caress the sleeping Prairie, they released her dust upon the banks of the wandering Seine.

There, among the shifting lights and trembling grasses, her remains dissolved into the earth like a final prayer, mingling with the river's silver thread, winding toward the Rivière Rouge as if to carry her soul toward the memory of her people. Her dreams had long since crumbled at Batoche, crushed beneath the iron heel of History, as had the luminous hope of the Métis, who once dreamed of raising a French-speaking nation upon the wild and limitless Plains.

Thus Alexie returned to the dust, like a vanquished heroine whose tomb would be no more than the embrace of the open sky, and whose epitaph would be written only in the sighs of the wind and the murmurs of forgotten rivers.

Vancouver, April 15, 2015

Table of Contents

Book 1

1. Rivière-aux-Rats, July 1843	7
2. Trois-Pistoles, my birthplace	9
3. Heading on the St. Lawrence icepack	13
4. Tadoussac	17
5. La Rivière-aux-Rats	19
6. My life in Rivière-aux-Rats	23
7. I'm learning to read and write	29
8. Betrayal	37
9. The Escape in a Canoe	40
10. The Visitor of the Night	44
11. Re-capture	48
12. The Crime	53
13. A Bear in a grumpy mood	57
14. On the Côte de Charlevoix	60
15. Captive	62
16. The Escape	66
17. Narcisse Doucet, from La Malbaie	70
18. The Beluga Massacre	74
19. The Hell of the Irish	78
20. The Corpse Robbers	83
21. The Legend of the White Lady	87
22. Québec City, at last!	90
23. The Big City	94
24. Rémi has disappeared	99
25. Bandits	103
26. At the Québec General Hospital	108
27. A certain Monsieur Ovide Légaré	112
28. Mademoiselle Alexie is very pretty	116
29....and even too pretty!	120
30. Mr. Légaré is really too nice	124

Red River

31. The fake tavern keeper was a real thief	128
32. Leaving for Montréal	132
33. Along the Chemin du Roy	137
34. Madame Légaré's Farewell Gift	140
35. A notary a little too obliging	144
36. Back in boy's clothes	149
37. Lost in misery	153
38. A hotel full of scoundrels and vermin	160
39. A brave but not foolhardy customer	164
40. The Axe Duel	169
41. The Messenger of Paradise	173
42. Aggression	177
43. Ghosts	181
44. Jocelyne Ducharme	185
45. Finally, my beloved Rémi	189

Book 2

1-We will be <i>coureurs-de-bois</i>	195
2-Goodbye Montréal, 4 mai 1850	200
3- En route for the Red River	204
4- Rowing like mad	207
5- The Saint Patroness of the Voyageurs	210
6- First problems	213
7- Destitute people's brawls	217
8- Portage Incident	220
9- At the stopover	224
10- Nights under the stars	228
11- A simple day's work	232
12- The log drivers	236
13- Portage Hell	239
14- La Pointe-au-Baptême	243
15- Farewell, Canada!	248
16- The manna	252
17- At last, the calm of the Great Lakes	256
18- Michilimackinac	260
19- The Pleasures of Fort William	264
20- Declarations of love to the moon	268

Red River

21- The Baptism of Rainy Lake	273
22- The Liquid Nebula: Lac-des-Bois	277
23- Fatal Day	280
24- Finally Red River	285
25- Pembina, capital of the French Métis of the West	288
26- The Fantastic rides	293
27- Over-oiled triggers	297
28- I build my nest	303
29- Unforgettable parties	307
30- Bison Hunt	311
31- The Sioux dispute our hunting ground	317
32- Vigil of Arms on the Prairie	321
33- The battle rages on	326
34- Tactical disengagement	331.
35- The battle resumes...	335
36- A proud and decisive victory	340
37- I take a concession in Aubigny	344
38- Preparing for the Bison Hunt	349
39- Departure for the Great Summer Hunt	354
40- The rules we make for ourselves	359
41- Finally, we're leaving..	364
42- In Search of the Bison	367
43- Heatwave-break	372
44- The stampede	376
45- Injured	381
46- The ups and downs of love and romance	386
47- With the smugglers	390
48- Prairie Fire	395
49- Rémi is alive!	400
50- Reunited...	406
51. The werewolf	411
52- The Horror de Fort Whoop-up	415
53- Montana's Outlaws	420
54- Tribulations on the Prairies	426
55- Back East	429

Red River

56- Chicoutimi	433
Epilogue	437
Final Word	439



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